

# Heavy Object AD >>War is Born of Knowledge and Education

## Part 1

Paris, Normandy District.

As you likely know, that city existed at the very center of a safe country and was the combined capital of the Legitimacy Kingdom's home country. Land values were so ridiculously high it was hard to even rent an apartment there. Buying one's own home sweet home was completely out of the question, but there were a few locations that took up a large chunk of land even in Paris, one of the world's most densely populated areas.

One of those was the Royal Techno Academy.

Quenser Barbotage had *returned* there this afternoon.

He wore the dark blue blazer of the Academy's uniform. That Azur Soleil – azure sun – was the symbol of a prestigious school that strict mothers aspired to so much that they would throw their child into the entrance exam wars whether the child liked it or not. And blue was undeniably the color of the Legitimacy Kingdom. In other words, that uniform was worn by the children who would support the future of that world power.

Quenser traveled the world destroying the colossal Objects which could survive a nuclear bomb and the online news called him a Dragon Killer, but his proper home was this school full of green lawns that took students from elementary school, middle school, high school, college, and graduate school.

Allen Jackrose, a male classmate who wore the same uniform but wore plastic elbow and knee pads, had this to say.

“Hey now. If you were coming back from the battlefield, you should’ve told me. Now we can’t even throw you a surprise party. And did you come straight here from the airport? I hope you at least paid your parents a visit, Quensette.”

“Don’t call me that. That’s the legendary maid who only appears at the cultural festival. And I couldn’t stay at home because my old man is sheltering yet another girl like he’s taking in an abandoned cat. This one’s the illegitimate child of some noble and she’s been caught in the middle of some inheritance issues! I step inside my room to find that girl has transformed it into her independent nation of cake and tea. Ahh, I’ll have to find a cheap hotel to spend the night.”

“Your old man has got one hell of a chivalrous spirit for some plain-looking guy in a suit. He’s a knight from the age of Saint George. They don’t even make movies about that kind of retro hero anymore.”

“What he has is a kind of sickness, same as a compulsive gambler or speed demon. He doesn’t even think about how it will benefit him! From what I’ve heard, it was something similar that led him to marry my mom while they were still students.”

“Don’t worry. You’ve got the same blood in your veins.”

Since the Academy had an elementary school, middle school, high school, college, graduate school, and all the related research buildings, the campus was both sprawling and complicated. It was so easy to get lost that visitors and hopeful students called it a dungeon.

They were in a dining hall.

Allen looked perfectly at home, but Quenser was looking around restlessly even as he leaned back in his chair and rested his legs on the table.

“I can’t believe I’m in here. The sign out front says it’s the noble dining hall, right? I feel out of place as a commoner. It’s like seeing the pink tiles of the girls locker room.”

“Quensette, I’m not going to even ask why you know the color of the tiles in

the girls locker room. But is it that weird? It's hard for me to tell as a poor noble with the proper ID but not much else. My home is a 500-year-old rundown apartment, you know?"

"That just makes it rarer. Is it a world heritage site made from an old monastery or something?" Quenser breathed an exasperated sigh. "Anyway, how have your film studies been going? Weren't you saying you planned to sell your script to a distribution company? How'd that go?"

"I made a connection with a producer and got their digital business card." Allen pulled out his smartphone and waved it around. "They're actually holding a competition today, but that was before all this trouble. To be honest, I'm carrying a print-out of my script under my clothes. Once this is over, I'm gonna run right there. Hopefully I'll look like the star showing up just in the nick of time."

"So even the Academy's geniuses have trouble finding work, huh? Why not get some help from that...what was it called? That club you can only join if your grades are near the top in the school? Um, the Golden Lion Club? You're part of that secret salon, aren't you?"

"That's only useful if you want strict military and government contacts. It's a complete waste of time for the more relaxed entertainment industry."

"Wow, that sounds good to me. I want an in as an Object designer, so I wish you'd hand over all those connections."

"Got anything useful to trade me? ...Anyway, I'm just clever enough to get perfect scores on my tests. When they hold me up like some kind of genius for that, it all feels so silly I wish I could trade lives with someone else."

Quenser and Allen both yawned.

They could hear some loud voices coming from outside the building.

"Speaking of the girls your old man rescues, have you heard what Monica is up to?"

"Lady Monica, huh?"

Quenser's voice was dripping with scorn, but Allen leaned forward.

“I heard she’s become an idol that sells decently enough. She visits different battlefields around the world and introduces cutting-edge Objects for everyone back in their living rooms! It’s damn amazing. She really can turn anything into a success. Hard to believe that’s the same girl who had to be sheltered in your food cellar after her family collapsed. I bet I could write an entire script just telling her life story.”

“Ha ha! Her!? Smiling for the camera? Pushing her tits together and shaking her ass for some sex appeal? Not a chance! She can’t go a sentence without calling you a servant, she criticizes how you open a damn door, she insists you stand by her side to make her look better, and she can’t get enough of picking on a commoner like me! There isn’t a snowball’s chance in hell she knows how to fake a smile!!”

“Um, uh...”

“And another thing. A battlefield idol reporter? She introduces cutting-edge Objects??? Nope, nope. There’s just no way. Wow, just imagining it gives me goose bumps. Besides, she’s lousy with machines! Whenever I brought her a portable TV or radio to keep her busy in our cramped cellar, she would break it before half a day was up and come crying to me every single time! Do you have any idea how many times I had to fix those things!? And how did that crazy girl even break them that badly!?”

“...”

“Hm? What’s the matter, Allen? You’ve gotten awfully quiet.”

Quenser looked confused and Allen finally spoke up in an apologetic way.

“Sorry, Quensette. I realize now that I really should have warned you sooner.”

“Warned me about what? Wait, don’t tell me. Did Monica get an extreme fan club here after her idol debut and they don’t take kindly to people badmouthing her? That’s just creepy!! There has to be something wrong with you to worship her of all people!!”

“Not...quite what I meant.”

Allen pointed toward Quenser.

No, he was technically pointing behind Quenser.

“Monica happened to have plans on campus, so she ended up returning here the same time as you.”

"Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!?"

He tried to spin around real quick, but it was too late.

Before he could, two arms wrapped around his neck from behind his chair. Someone's full body weight leaned on him, a sweet scent and some warmth surrounded him, and a girl's voice whispered in his ear as if to a lover.

The twintail demon rubbed her cheek against him as she spoke.

[illegible]

“Hgh!! Hgh, Monikaaaaa!! Why are you here and why do you already have me in a headlock!?”

“Sorry if it prickles a bit. I was in a planning meeting for the surprise campus concert, so this Cinderella dress isn’t complete yet. It still has safety pins here and there. Hee hee hee hee hee.”

He could not turn around.

She had his head held in place and his butt had risen from the chair a bit, but she only spoke to him ever so gently.

“I’m sure you’re exhausted after your long trip, but let’s go have a chat over there. It seems you need a refresher course on how a knight and servant should treat his master☆”

“No, I’ve never forgotten a word you’ve said, Lady Monica. You are looking as beautiful as ever and your nobility is clearly greater than a mere external golden ratio because I can sense the glow of the soul within you! You remind me of a pure white blossom shining in the moonlight at the peak of Mont Blanc!”

“I don’t want blatant lies! Mont Blanc is snowy year round, so there are no flowers growing at its peak!! Come here, servant!! You dare remove your collar and forget your vow of servitude? Some reeducation is clearly in order!!!!”

“Pff, wait, you don’t mean that thing where you tap my shoulders with that

stick, do-...wait, no, no! Wait, Lady Monica! Why are you bringing that pepper shaker to my eye!? Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaait!!!???"

The look in Allen's eyes was warm as he watched the sacrifice dragged away, chair and all.

(God, I'm jealous. What could be better than flirting with a former noble and current idol? Monica chose to be a battlefield idol reporter so she could chase after Quensette and Quensette keeps accidentally placing himself right in her strike zone. Why don't they just get married???)

But unfortunately, this was not the time to be flirting.

After all...

With a loud boom, the dining hall's outer wall collapsed.

Yes, a handmade railgun shell had shot through the wall.

It was fortunate everyone was knocked to the ground by the shockwave because it prevented them from being skewered by the shower of wreckage that followed.

"Ugh, cough!!"

"Those goddamn teachers! Have they finally pulled out that experimental nuclear fusion pellet launcher!?"

Allen did not actually approach the window, *which was nailed shut with boards*, to check. Approaching the torn-up wall now would get you filled with holes.

He kept his head low and checked his smartphone.

If he had actually sent out a drone, it would have been immediately located and shot down by an experimental laser emitter. He was viewing footage from the swiveling camera attached to the top of the bell tower.

The green lawn had been torn up in places and tractors and snowplows with metal plates attached for armor were driving around. The things that looked like monstrous volleyball launchers were handmade cannons created by the best of each department. The naphtha-filled flamethrower was on the kinder end of the spectrum. There was also a compressed gas cannon using liquid

nitrogen and a short-range missile launcher that misused proof-of-concept models for standalone rockets.

There was not just one side making a unilateral attack. Makeshift barricades were set up all over and people were leaning out from behind them to fire on the others. The students and teachers were using weapons made from the knowledge of their respective technical schools.

Either the school was self-governed or the police had decided their standard equipment was not up to the task because there was no sign of the local authorities. That was hardly surprising when everyone had firepower capable of blowing right through your average armored truck. A police car or riot shield would be as useless as paper. The police had only set up shields outside the fence to make sure no stray bullets escaped the campus.

The weapon that had attacked the dining hall was an especially brutal model: an experimental railgun loaded on the back of an armored truck.

Quenser saw something from the floor after his chair flipped over backwards.

He saw Monica recklessly and unsteadily attempting to stand up in her pinned-together dress and he saw more of the dining hall's outer wall being blown away.

The railgun had been fired again.

"It's gonna hit-bwah!!!???"

Before he could give a warning, he was flipped over again.

And as the shell cut across the dining hall, it caught perfectly on just the skirt of Monica's dress, blew it away, and broke through into the hallway.

A few scraps of cloth fluttered through the air like swan feathers.

Quenser thought blood was going to drip from his ears, but he poured all his strength into his voice.

"That was some impressive control!! But that's a railgun, right!? Why didn't it blow you to smithereens!?"

"My dress is only pinned together, so only the outer cloth came off."

“...I really don’t think that’s enough to explain it.”

“Do not act like I should be dead, servant!”

“Well, I’m not gonna complain too much when I get to see some skin!!”

Super-mini dress Monica belatedly hid her thighs behind a hand and used the other hand to slap him, but with how long she had known him, she should have known he would see that as a reward.

Woken up by the slap, Quenser dragged the twintail idol to the floor so she would not be hit by the third railgun shot and he shouted to Allen.

“Can we get student reinforcements!?”

“They won’t arrive in time from where they are. If we don’t get out of here now, the teachers’ troops will be in here.”

Some dangerous words were being used here.

And it was not restricted to Quenser’s group.

The shouts heard outside the building were very different from the healthy ones of runners and sports practice.

“Wahh!? Someone from that fanatical Animal Committee has finally unlocked the cages! Are those crocodiles!? No, they’re gators!!”

“Ulljenne and the others are not weapons!! Animals are our neighbors and must be protected!! If you keep complaining, I’ll sue you for defamation!!”

“Liar!! You put them in special-made reinforced suits to increase the power of their jaws!! Hey, someone bring in the taser! Hook it up to the battery and amp for the light music club’s guerilla concert!!”

“Outta the way! Don’t get anywhere near any water!! Charge complete! Let’s do this!! Prepare for discharge!!!!!!”

A loud zap, a blinding flash of light, and several screams followed.

The railgun was frightening, but a pack of gators sent a different type of fear crawling along one’s fingertips. The overall situation was best described as chaotic and the makeshift strategy meeting continued in the dining hall.

Allen held his head in his hands as he spoke.



“Unfortunately, we have to abandon the dining hall. I guess that means the teachers will take the fridges and ovens. We’re losing some important infrastructure here. We need to hurry out of here with as much food and water as we can carry!!”

“In that case, we should tear down some curtains and make some bags. The Island Nation has these convenient things called furoshiki! They can make all sorts of bags depending on how you tie them!!”

“Quensette, what will you do!?”

“You’re abandoning this place, right?” The student grinned. “Then leave all the kitchen work to the legendary maid Quensette. I’ll tamper with the gas range a bit. When those greedy teachers come marching in here, the whole room will blow up and turn all the leftover food to ashes. There won’t be a single crumb left for them to eat.”

Allen whistled.

“Scorched earth tactics, huh? That’s pretty cruel. And if you have it turned to ashes right before their eyes, they’ll probably explode with infighting. And here I thought neither of you two would be returning home at a time like this.”

“To be clear, I never would’ve come had I known!!” shouted Quenser. “The second I entered the campus, the gate slammed shut behind me and fighting erupted all around me! But since I’m here, I’m gonna make sure every last one of them regrets it!!!!!!”

“I was right to drag you two into this. Anyway, let’s scam and begin fighting back against those teachers!!”

“Wait, how long do you plan to keep holding me, servant!?”

“Until you stop shaking!!”

Once the necessary work was complete, Quenser’s group grabbed an electric nail gun and a makeshift slingshot bow gun made from a bicycle tire tube before leaving the dining hall.

Yes.

They were in Paris, right smack in the center of the Legitimacy Kingdom’s

home country.

The radiant Royal Techno Academy was split between the students and teachers, creating a truly unprecedented battlefield.

## Part 2

The teachers' reinforcements arrived sooner than expected.

Quenser gave a frantic shout while running down the hallway.

"Hurry, hurry!"

"Wait, Quensette! You're forgetting something!!"

"The teachers are already here, so the dining hall is gonna blow! Besides, I've got a weapon, food, my wallet, and a condom. What could I be forgetting!?"

"The heel of Monica's pump broke and she tripped!!"

"Oh, geez, really!?"

Quenser was annoyed, but he ran back, placed his hands on super-mini dress Monica's back and below her knees, picked her up princess carry style, and resumed his escape. He handed the twintail girl what he had been carrying.

"Kyah!! D-don't touch me, servant!!"

"Shut up! Say a word more and I'll silence you with a kiss!!"

They continued arguing back and forth as he ran down the hallway.

Both Quenser's hands were full, so they had to rely on Allen's electric nail gun and Monica's foil, a light-weight fencing sabre. However...

"There they are! It's the students!!"

"We can take them right now. Restrain them!!"

Some adults suddenly charged out from another hallway.

Quenser's throat went dry, but...

"Servant. Sway to the right and take one step forward!"

Monica thrust out her sports sabre while still in his arms. As soon as it lightly

contacted the lab-coat-wearing adults in the chest or thigh, bluish-white sparks exploded out.

“Abwah!?”

The professors collapsed and convulsed on the ground while Monica calmly brushed her hair back with a hand.

“Oh, excuse me. One of those was a male épée finishing blow. How indecent of me. But this is all those dimwitted teachers can manage. Fencing already used an electric current to determine a hit, so hook it up to one of the building’s AEDs and voilà.”

“Quit acting like you know how to use machines. I put that together as a sidearm for myself, but I see you still have a bad habit of stealing people’s toys.”

“Servant.”

“Forget I said anything, my lady.”

That said, it clearly had less to do with her fencing skills and more to do with the teachers being distracted by the skin exposed by the idol’s torn dress, but Quenser held his tongue since a high-voltage attack from a defibrillator was too much for him. And they could not hang around here much longer.

They started running again.

They needed to reach safety.

He and Allen broke through the glass covering the faculty smoking room and hid behind a thin partition just as a gas explosion blew up the dining hall behind them.

Quenser grimaced at the intense pain in his ears from the boom.

“Dammit! And I can’t even complain since I did it!!”

“Let’s keep going. We’re almost to a student barricade.”

They finally managed to scramble back to their fellow students.

There were quite a few students huddled behind the barricade. Nobles and commoners normally would not even share the same coffee beans, but they got along just fine when they had a common enemy.

Even so, they could not let their guard down.

Something cut across just past the barricade. And it was accompanied by an explosive noise that sounded like the buzzing of a bee amplified thousands or even tens of thousands of times.

“Um, as you can see, a machinegun is a weapon capable of tearing a hole in a single point by focusing its fire there. Now, you might think a Gatling gun using gunpowder is the most powerful of them all, but...”

“Shit! It’s that infamous professor! He’s as nutty as ever!!”

“Fall back, fall back!! Why the hell is he giving a lecture like normal with all this going on!? And the world’s most dangerous lecture at that! He’s got a whiteboard and a heavy machinegun! They couldn’t show this kind of experiment on an educational show!!”

“The explosive can also come in liquid and gas form,” continued the professor. “For example, if you take LNG meant for a gas turbine and keep just the right amount in the barrel at all times, you can get a truually incredible rate of fire like this.”

Fortunately, the crazy old lab coat man with wild gray hair apparently had the same 5-inch visual range as someone walking while using their smartphone, so he did not seem to notice them. He slowly cut across in front of the barricade while carrying the heavy machinegun on his back and rolling the wheeled whiteboard along with him. Of course, he was also firing an unbelievable amount of bullets as he did so. Those trying to escape bought some time with a wheeled barricade made by taking experimental steel panels mixed with heat-resistant reactive material and stuffing it into a giant metal basket meant to carry basketballs, but they could tell it was being worn down while sparks flew everywhere. It would not last forever.

Quenser gulped and spoke.

“Is he like the grim reaper wandering around an online game’s field? He could tear down these thin walls in an instant if he tried. The worst part is that he’s doing this while completely sober. Who the hell gave him a teaching license?”

“Yeah, but he’s one of the people officially recognized for bringing the

Legitimacy Kingdom's Objects from the First to the Second Generation. And he was on a list of the 100 scientists most likely to build a time machine this century."

"So that's what happens to a genius who loses sight of common sense. Quensette, try not to end up like him, okay?"

Once the explosive old man left and they breathed a sigh of relief, Allen explained the situation.

It had begun with some confusing matter related to the suspected misappropriation of funds for teaching supplies.

Top Student Allen simplified it as follows: a conflict between the teachers and students.

"Basically, some idiot teacher was bribed into purchasing a bunch of unneeded teaching supplies, so the students started protesting with a megaphone in hand because we have a right to a proper education. And it devolved into this."

It was not simple enough to just say the naïve and idealistic children took issue with the messy world of the adults. Quenser had chosen the Royal Techno Academy to assist his dream of being an Object designer because its students were the treasures of the Legitimacy Kingdom. Its graduates would be directly involved in the growth of all that world power's countries. Fail to properly educate them and the entire world power would suffer.

"The conflict started small, but it got way worse once the beautiful Student Council President was attacked after gathering the entire high school behind her. According to what I heard in the Golden Lion Club, she was independently researching the misappropriation of funds and was just about to submit a secret file to a prosecutor. And popular people have a lot of influence, for better or for worse."

A pile of desks and chairs blocked a portion of the hallway. Quenser's group was hiding behind those along with other boys and girls in the same blue blazers. Quenser and Allen handed out the food and water they had brought from the dining hall.

“You said this is a conflict between the teachers and students, but do all the teachers support that side?”

“How should I know? But if a teacher approaches with their hands up and insists they want to join our side, who’s going to believe them? They’d just get ganged up on and beaten. And anyone who refuses to take a side will just get attacked by both sides. You’ve gotta pick a side to protect yourself, but the teachers only have one option there. Everyone has to pick a side, but they won’t want to die.”

Quenser groaned.

Having no opening for surrender was its own kind of tragedy. People would be forced to fight to the end even if they did not want to fight at all.

“The Student Council President, who is getting complete bedrest at the hospital, was worried about that too. I only know what I’ve overheard at that salon, but her attempt to find some conclusive evidence apparently came from a benevolent desire to end this before the conflict grew. But the teachers rejected that by attacking her. It’s their own fault. And that’s what led to this macaroni western.”

“Is that really all there is to it? I mean, this is trouble at a school right? Won’t the government’s...um, what was it called? Office of Academics? Won’t the stuffed shirts there come mediate this?”

“Have you forgotten where we are? This is the Royal Techno Academy.”

“Royal means it’s funded by national tax money, right!? So don’t they have to follow the rules!?”

“Officially, yes. But the Office of Academics can’t actually do much since so much here involves military secrets. I sometimes hear about those bureaucratic issues at the Golden Lion Club. If one faction took control of the Academy, it would break the balance of power, so the Offices of Military Affairs, Academics, Administration, and plenty of others all want to be in charge. The school is effectively self-governed because it falls into a gap between all those competing offices.”

That meant the adults could not just talk this out.

In that case, they had to grab giant blackboard triangles and metal bats to fight it out until one side or the other accepted defeat.

War was the absolute worst thing humanity had created, but as more wars had been fought, Quenser felt like they had cleaned them up or at least specialized them with a structure that prevented them from lasting too long. The clean wars accepted by the housewives in front of their TVs would never have ended up like this.

(Wars used to be so long they could last for 30 years or 100 years, right? Who has time to mess with that?)

“Students like us outnumber the teachers by a lot, but the teachers have better tech. Each of their attacks is ridiculously destructive and some of them are trying to send out a bunch of remote-controlled unmanned weapons to fill out their numbers. Plus, they know the layout of the Academy better than we do. When you combine personnel with tech, it’s pretty much a stalemate.”

For one thing, what was the win condition here?

Did the students have to slaughter every last teacher to end this? And was the opposite an option? Since neither side could surrender, there had to be some kind of target they could destroy to end it, but what exactly could they destroy to convince the other side they had lost?

And.

If they did not convince the other side, they could only continue killing the enemy until they had. They had to keep providing “examples” until one side was too afraid to keep going.

At some point, the afternoon grew into evening.

Flames colored their surroundings and the air smelled of farewells.

“The Board Chairman and the Headmaster. We need to target them,” said Allen. “Those are their pillars of support. In a 2-hour movie, they’d be the ones to appear in the first 15 minutes and reappear in the last 15 minutes. And the evidence suggests one of the two was involved in the misappropriation of funds. It doesn’t matter if we actually find an account book. We just have to capture a VIP who knows the whole story. That should convince the others to



give up. Then we can grab a megaphone and shout, 'Are any of the teachers looking nervous!? Then they're the criminals who got the rest of you innocent teachers involved in this battle. Once they're gone, you can surrender safely.' "

Twintailed Monica responded to that with exasperation while tapping the floor with her stun sabre made from a modified foil.

"Wouldn't that just start a witch hunt? You're just asking them to hand over anyone who acts even remotely suspicious. They might just be a naturally heavy sweater."

"It's only fair. They're already targeting the elementary school, middle school, and university Student Council Presidents because they're the pillars of the students. Plus, the teachers will be easier to defeat if they start attacking each other out of suspicion. I don't want to deal with this any longer than necessary, so I want to end this nonsense and run over to the screenwriting competition."

Allen explained it all quite smoothly, but there was no real hatred in his voice.

His emotions had reached the point where driving the teacher's to absolute destruction felt completely natural.

It was not that he would lose his cool and kill them.

He could kill them while keeping his cool.

The attack on the beautiful Student Council President may have affected the students more than expected.

As "outsiders", Quenser and Monica had to exchange a glance and shrug. A lot more had happened in their short absence than they had expected.

"But VIPs like that will be strictly guarded, won't they? What do we do about that?"

"That's why we're fighting over infrastructure now: food, water, power, gas, air conditioning, space to sleep, communications, *etc.* If this drags on long enough, clothing and detergent will carry a lot more weight. ...Whatever happens, it's important to drive your opponent into an environment where simply breathing wears them down. Then you attack their headquarters after they lose their focus."

That was why Quenser, Allen, and the others had been in charge of the dining hall. Not even the toughest soldiers could keep fighting without food to eat. That had ended in failure, but the teachers had lost their chance at the food as well.

Similar things were happening all over campus. There was fighting over the drink and bread vending machines and even over the chlorine-smelling water of the indoor pool. That was due to a rumor that the tap water could be shut off at any time. They had heard there were students in school swimsuits and teachers in racing swimsuits beating each other with kickboards and lane lines.

“Hold on, Monica. Why are you eating macarons? Where did you get those from!?”

“Those Culinary Research Club girls over there gave them to me. They said something about morale being a surprisingly important factor. Servant, if you show me you have recalled how to treat your master, I might just grant you one.”

“Lady Monicaaaa!!”

“Well done. Now say ‘woof’ for me.”

The twintail girl pulled a snack from its clear wrapping and tossed it toward Quenser’s mouth. It was degrading, but sugar was absurdly attractive to his exhausted mind.

“Come to think of it, those girls were carrying bags of salt like they’re the most important things in the world.”

“Munch, munch. For real? I know it’s necessary, but I really want to avoid being holed up in here for so long we have to subsist off of water and minerals. Now that’s a scary thought.”

Then Allen’s smartphone received an email.

After scanning through it, he showed it to Quenser and Monica.

“It’s time to get to work.”

“What is it now?”

“Just when I thought we had cut off the teachers’ access to food, that

meddlesome school store has apparently opened a mobile shop for the teachers. They've gotten some emergency rations from outside the Academy fence. Those meals were prepared by parents worried about their kids, but now they're just going to fill the teachers' bellies."

"So our job is to get rid of that food cart, right?"

"Unfortunately. We'll blow it away and capture the aproned young woman in charge of the store. We'll threaten her with our projectile weapons and finish her off with Monica's stun sabre. Does everyone know what to do?"

"Sigh. Why does it sound like I have the most dangerous job?" asked Monica. "Did the Legitimacy Kingdom's spirit of chivalry decide to take a vacation?"

"Calm down. Now while she is an adult, she's not actually a teacher, so this is something of a gray zone. But we know the teachers are relying on the school store, so this will help apply pressure to them."

## Part 3

Every part of the building was a brutal scene. The hallways and stairs were impassable due to piles of desks and chairs. There were holes in the walls and floors and collapsed building materials were scattered across the floors. The bulletin boards on the wall had only the corners of printouts remaining after the paper was violently torn away, perhaps for use as kindling.

Amid it all, a redheaded woman wearing a lab coat and a long skirt walked along a hallway of professors. She held a wicker basket, she stood tall with dignity, and she nodded at the armed men and women she passed.

“Hello. I am here with supplies. The water bottles won’t last too long since they were only filled from the tap, but you never know when the tap water will be stopped.”

“Oh, thanks. The students are right over there. Make sure they don’t attack you.”

After watching the professors rush to the front line, the woman breathed a sigh of relief.

She continued walking until she had left the danger zone and then she spoke to no one in particular.

“Looks like we’re in the clear.”

There was a sound like the wind beating at a curtain.

Quenser poked his head out from below her long skirt.

“Phew. Sorry about this for, um, a few different reasons.”

“It’s fine. I am an intermediary, after all.”

The Academy was divided between the students and teachers, but with an elementary through graduate school, not everyone knew each other. Generally,

people only recognized people from the same class, lab, or club. They had used that fact to have mature-looking students change clothes, temporarily infiltrate the teachers, and gather intelligence.

But the opposite was not an option.

Unless there was a genius girl who had skipped a bunch of grades and become a visiting lecturer, not even the most baby-faced teacher could pass themselves off as a fellow kid.

“It’s this classroom, right?” said Quenser. “Okay, I’ll leave here. You be careful, okay?”

“I will. By the way, do I really look that mature? I’m hesitant to ask, but that means I look sexy and not old, right!?”

“I’m praying you can finally graduate this year. Also, the panties worn below pantyhose don’t have to be beige. Something more exciting would be better. Like red. Adieu.”

After a bitter farewell with the mature upperclassman girl, Quenser entered one of the empty classrooms. Allen and Monica were already there after arriving by different routes.

“Servant... Don’t you think your solution was somewhat inelegant?”

“Quensette, you never change, do you? But maybe you shouldn’t do that in front of Monica. Or are you trying to get her attention?”

“That doesn’t matter. We need to do something about the school store woman’s food cart that’s giving food to the teachers, right? You said there was a safe route from here, didn’t you?”

With impromptu weapons in hand and zip ties to use as handcuffs, they got started.

The hallways and stairs were blocked by occasional barricades and the areas controlled by either side were arranged in a confusing manner, but there were exits. There were holes large enough to crawl through in the walls and floors and some had rope ladders dangling from them. It was arranged so looking at the blueprint would not tell you where to go.

Super-mini dress Monica sounded annoyed (while being very cautious of her skirt during the extreme vertical movement).

“I hope you didn’t set it up this way just to make it feel more like a secret base.”

“Setting the mood is surprisingly important. A battle begins before the fighting actually starts.”

“S-servants should not act more knowledgeable than their master!!”

“You really haven’t changed at all!! Not that’s gonna stop me from enjoying the view up your skirt!!”

“Do I need to stomp on your face, servant!?”

While they argued, they made it outside the building. All the doors and windows were marked by the teachers and had gun turrets aimed at them, so only the holes in the walls were accessible. The flowers of a flower bed apparently happened to hide this hole from view.

They did not feel any freer with the evening sky overhead.

Allen spoke while curled up in his blue blazer with elbow and knee pads.

“Let’s stay low and follow the walls around to the back of the building. It’s a lot easier than sneaking through the ducts like in an action movie. The route between the middle school building and the shortest fence is their silk road. That will bring us right by it.”

There was no real reason to disagree. Quenser and Monica followed Allen as he led the way.

There was little cover outside, but that did not mean it was completely deserted. Some people with highly specialized bicycles used the almost complete silence to ride around out there. They were couriers. They were probably from the Cycle Racing Club or something, but they were transporting supplies between buildings or delivering letters containing information that could not fall into the teachers’ hands.

Since the teachers had an armored truck with a flamethrower on top making occasional patrols, that job really was putting their life at risk.

“Stop, Quensette. Don’t leave the bushes. We need a detour.”

“Seriously? But if we’re spotted, we’ll be blown to bits.”

“Look up. See those ‘party balls’ hanging up there? Those weren’t in the reports, so the teachers must have set them up recently.”

Quenser and Monica hesitantly looked up and saw something like fist-sized fruits hanging from the tops of the streetlights. They were cans full of explosives and they had razor blades blatantly tied on with wire. If those exploded over your head, you would be hit by a storm of blades.

“Those are tripwires, right? It’s different from the normal method, but there’s a straight line from the bottom of the can to the ground.”

“That’s why I called them ‘party balls’, Quensette. But there might be another switch besides that obvious tripwire. And that half-assed setup might go off just from a strong gust of wind shaking the can. It would be best to find another way around, right?”

They ever-so-carefully crossed that deadly territory.

After returning to the bushes and circling to the back of the building, they all groaned together.

“This is crazy. It’s that railgun!!”

“So even if it stands out too much, they’re completely focused on securing a food supply, huh? But that just shows how cornered they feel.”

“U-um, you’re kidding, right? All we have is my stun sabre, an electric nail gun, a slingshot bow gun made from a bicycle tire tube, and around 20 zip ties. Surely you aren’t planning to charge an armored truck with a pellet launcher attached!”

Monica’s face tensed with her modified foil in hand.

Her response was only natural after seeing that thing’s destructive power earlier. If the teachers noticed them, they would be blown to smithereens along with whatever wall they were hiding behind.

Quenser and Allen exchanged a glance.

“It’s not possible.”

“Not even a little.”

Twintail Monica breathed a sigh of relief when she heard that, but then things changed.

Allen pulled a small egg-shaped device from his pocket, surreptitiously tossed it toward the railgun truck, and spoke up while operating his smartphone.

“Allen to High School General Building Rooftop Team. Requesting support.”

“?”

It happened just as the battlefield idol reporter frowned.

“Activating marker. Volleyball regulars, go get it!!”

Several small scale explosions followed.

More and more melon-sized items were fired down from the rooftop.

In no time, the armored truck protecting the food cart was engulfed in orange flames. Rather than the dry explosions of explosives, this was the sticky flames of Molotov cocktails.

Quenser and Allen sounded carefree as they looked up at the roof.

“Damn, you gotta love those demons in bloomers.”

“It’s even hotter when they have those elbow and knee pads on. You don’t see them all geared up like that very often.”

“You mean like how the exact same busty girl has a way stronger upperclassman aura when she’s wearing a Student Council armband?”

“God is in the details, right?”

The two continued their calm chat while the explosions continued. Meanwhile, twintail Monica was nearly knocked to the ground, so she clung to Quenser and shouted. He enjoyed her warmth, but the proximity of the stun sabre caused his balls to shrink. He could not focus.

“Wh-what is that!?”

“You can’t tell, Monica? It’s a volleyball launcher. But the balls are filled with



gasoline instead of air. What I threw over there was a kid's personal alarm, so they're using the GPS signal to aim the bombs."

"Oh?" asked Quenser. "That must be tricky since they don't break like a bottle would. What's the ignition method?"

"Molotov cocktails."

"Wait, so they've taped eye drop bottles all over them or something? Talk about dangerous!"

"Your slingshot bow gun's arrowheads are pretty much the same, aren't they? You stuffed a bunch of things in a glass fiber bag the size of a ping pong ball so the contents will scatter like a shower when it hits."

"It's more like a plastic balloon with caps attached here and there. The Academy developed it to scatter the jelly food for killing roaches."

While those two described the weapons like they were on an infomercial, the railgun truck burned before their eyes. Monica was still clinging to Quenser and trembling.

"I-it isn't going to fire back on us, is it?"

"Railguns – or rather, the large-capacity batteries used to power them – are generally weak to heat. With that much fire covering it, it'll swell out like Island Nation rice cakes and stop working altogether. I mean, it is only an experimental prototype. It doesn't have proper insulation or cooling."

Incidentally, the aproned young woman pulling around the food cart had completely panicked and fallen onto her butt. They would not even need Monica's foil or the zip ties. That woman had lost the will to fight.

"Does that complete our mission, Allen? If we don't show some mercy soon, she's going to piss herself."

"Not a chance. There's still some trash left over there."

The problem was the burning armored truck.

"Then let's end it quickly. The driver is going to scramble out before they roast to death and the volleyball team is leaning over the edge of the roof despite the danger. Let's finish the driver off for good before they can cause

some damage with a handmade rocket launcher or something.”

Quenser held the slingshot bow gun made from a tire tube and Allen held the electric nail gun as they began to approach the burning armored truck.

But then something odd happened.

A girl of about 10 ran out from the wall of a nearby building.

“Stop!!”

She ran on unsteady legs to reach the (remains of?) the armored truck, spun around, and held her small hands out as wide as she could as if to protect it.

The short-haired girl wore something like a red suit with a tight miniskirt and she shouted at the top of her lungs.

“That’s enough! Both sides lay down your weapons! It’s wrong for us to be killing each other like this!!”

All of a sudden, she was in tear-jerker mode.

Quenser’s group had been interrupted at the last second and was not sure what was happening, so they could not decide whether they should run out there or crouch back down.

“Who is she!? A pacifist from the elementary school!?”

“Wait, this is bad!”

The burning armored truck’s door opened behind the girl.

Just as they had expected, a large, muscular man grabbed the girl’s shoulder from behind. Then he wrapped his arm around her neck to use her as a shield.

“None of you move or this kid-...!!”

Quenser and Allen started moving before he had finished his threat.

With two dry sounds, orange sparks flew from the side of the armored truck behind the large man.

He cowered down and glanced back without thinking.

“W-wait, you understand the situation, don’t you? I have a hostage!!”

Quenser and Allen ignored that and boldly approached him.

But instead of burning with an indomitable fighting spirit, they did so while tilting their heads a little.

“Hey, Allen. Do you know how to shoot a gun?”

“Don’t ask me. You’re the battlefield student, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, but they don’t let students touch them. So how are you supposed to hold one? Like this? Or do you hold it sideways like this? Looks like something from a mafia movie, doesn’t it?”

“No, like this. See?”

Another odd sound rang out.

The sparks coming from the armored truck behind the cowering man were enough to know a metal nail had shot right past him at high speed.

“Quit acting like you know what you’re doing. You didn’t even hit him.”

“Hm, that’s weird.”

“You’re supposed to use the...sight, is it called? Line that up to aim.”

“Yeah, but does your handmade bow gun even have a sight?”

“I dunno.”

“Well, not that it matters.”

“Wha-, wait, hostage!”

The large man trembled and stammered, but it was too late. It was obvious a 10-year-old girl was not large enough to function as a pure shield.

They continued approaching him.

And those inscrutable modern children spoke their conclusion in unison.

“We just have to keep trying until we hit.”

“We just have to keep trying until we hit.”

Only a scream followed.

The large man shoved the small girl away, turned tail, and ran.

Quenser lowered his bow gun and caught the girl, but Allen was different.

A few dull sounds rang out in quick succession.

And while watching the large man writhing on the ground holding his leg, he spat out some cold words.

“What an idiot. The hostage was the only reason he was still alive.”

But Quenser was in no position to make a witty comment.

The red suit girl in his arms gave him a solid chomp.

“Ow!? Wait, wait, let me explain! That was all an act to get him to let go of his hostage! It was all a plan that put your safety first!!”

“You fool!! Why do you have to take the easy way out? He had lost his will to fight. He was trembling. You didn’t have to go that far!!”

The struggling girl tried to approach the injured man, so Quenser quickly and firmly held her back. He did not want her taken hostage again.

But once twintailed Monica decided it was safe and finally came out of hiding, she looked at him like he was absolute scum. She poked him with the tip of her modified-foil stun sabre.

“Okay, servant. That was assault, groping, and kidnapping. That’s three outs. Better luck next life.”

“Wait, really!? You’re counting that!? But it was necessary to keep her safe. If I had let her go and do what she wanted, she might have been killed! Would you arrest someone for molestation after they rescued a drowning child from the ocean? Of course not!”

Allen also sounded somewhat gloomy.

“Quensette.”

“Please, say something. You’re about to start on an important plan to capture the Board Chairman or Headmaster, so you need all the help you can get, right? You don’t want to lose a useful soldier to bizarre accusations, do you?”

“Quensette.”

“Hey, Allen, what’s with that tone? Is no one on my side??? F-fine then. I’ll follow the safe country rules. But please let me choose my lawyer! I-if I’m

remembering right, my aunt's cousin's friend's neighbor's tutor's social media friend's impersonator is an eloquent son of a bitch from some law office or another!!”

“This isn’t about that, Quensette.”

Allen pointed at Quenser.

No, at the girl in his arms.

“Now that I have a closer look, this is Board Chairman Elritta Champs-Élysées.”

“Hm?”

Quenser looked down at the girl in his arms.

She responded by clearing her throat.

## Part 4

Apparently, a lot – a very, very lot – had changed while Quenser was gone.

“Wasn’t the Board Chairman a gray-haired old lady!? Why’d she de-age all of a sudden!?”

For the time being, they pulled the full food cart to the nearby high school gym which functioned as a student base. It was closer to dinnertime than lunchtime and the students there had barely had anything to eat, so after placating the rush of students with food, they asked what was going on.

The students inside the gym wore a variety of uniforms: basketball, hockey, tennis, squash, cheerleading, gymnastics, *etc.* Other than the thick hockey pads, there did not seem to be much of a logical reason for it. Maybe they were reducing individual anxiety by providing a sense of belonging or showing their team unity.

The meals they shared were sandwiches from Honey & Bread, a popular bakery just off campus which was a well-known battleground at lunchtime. That only increased the resentment toward the teachers for trying to steal the food.

Since the aproned young woman from the school store was in a gray zone outside either side of the fight, they had zip tied her hands behind her back, hung the personal alarm from her neck, and told her to walk out through the Academy’s front gate. They had of course already attached that GPS identifier to an email saying “I am a foolish turkey. Please do not shoot me.” Of course, this was not done out of kindness. They simply did not have the food or guards to spare for a prisoner and the more people they took with them, the harder it would be.

Finally, it was time to get down to business.

Allen sounded carefree as he grabbed a club sandwich.

“You’re thinking of the previous Board Chairman who had a stroke recently. It ended up not being life threatening, but she was replaced regardless. Now, the Academy’s Board Chairman has been part of the Champs-Élysées family for generations. Lady Elritta here was chosen this time.”

Quenser and Monica looked to the 10-year-old girl and exchanged a glance.

“Wait, wait. Allen, didn’t you say either the Board Chairman or Headmaster was involved in the misappropriation of funds? You’re saying this girl is the culprit? Don’t make me laugh. We’re not talking about shoplifting from a candy store here.”

“We can’t be so sure,” readily stated that awful friend. “The Academy is said to be the greatest educational institute for the sciences, but it’s come to light that its finances are actually in dire straits. The new Board Chairman would have had a bunch of problems dumped on her lap right off the bat, so she would have been desperate to find a way to pay off debts which had piled up for several generations. She didn’t make the debts, but they became her problem when the baton was passed to her. So if the devil began whispering in her ear, you can never predict what she would do. I mean, she could leave the actual financial calculations to her secretary or accountant. If she was told she could claim ignorance and get away with it, she might just agree and join the other criminals.”

“Wait, how little do you trust her?”

When Quenser asked that, Elritta (who had ended up sitting in his lap) tore a bite out of a fruit and cream sandwich with a sulky look on her face.

“That is not what happened,” she said while munching on the sandwich.

Any amount of spice must have been too much for her because she showed no interest in the honey mustard chicken sandwiches or the peppery BLTs. It was possible it was more the idea of spiciness she avoided than the actual flavor. The influence of people’s first impressions could be quite powerful in the culinary world.

“First of all, it is very odd that the Academy has split between students and teachers.”

“What? This isn’t some conspiracy theory about the Capitalist Corporations or Information Alliance infiltrating the Academy to sabotage our future Object development, is it???”

Monica sounded highly skeptical, but that was not Elritta’s point.

She had this to say:

“You have it backwards.”

“?”

“You think the teachers are trying to attack the students because they do not know how to deal with the financial malpractice and so you have to fight back, correct?”

“Yes. What about it?”

Allen sensed something ominous about that question, so he was very cautious in his question.

But Board Chairman Elritta gave a derisive snort and continued.

“That is backwards. The teachers are not behind this. The true villain is manipulating the teachers into attacking the students.”

The sandwich in Quenser’s mouth never seemed to reach his throat.

That premise – even as a hypothetical – was far too dangerous.

“Hold on. What does that mean?”

“The villain is not one of the teachers. You will never find a teacher who was involved in the financial malpractice.”

“Wait, wait! What are you-...?”

“What the true villain fears most is having the adults find the evidence of that malpractice. Not just childish complaints, but properly-researched adult testimony. So they split the Academy between students and teachers in order to get rid of the faculty members who were investigating the matter. You were unwittingly acting as the villain’s vanguard. To kill the very people who were revealing the truth.”

No.



If it was this much of a shock for Quenser, then how bad would it be for Allen who had been fighting this whole time based on a hatred he thought was only natural? He seemed to be having trouble getting oxygen to his throat.

He held his body in his arms, which produced a crinkling of paper from his stomach.

That was the script he had planned to submit to that contest.

Even if it was idealistic or self-aggrandizing, that was a product of his entire moral worldview.

“...”

Even when he thought at least one of the teachers was the villain, he would have felt some guilt.

But what if they were all innocent?

What did that make someone who had chased them around, beaten them, and shot at them?

How was he supposed to work through that guilt???

“I will explain it piece by piece.” Elritta sounded apologetic as she licked some cream from her fingers. “Let me get one important thing out of the way first. The misappropriation of funds for teaching materials does not exist. There was financial malpractice, but it was an entirely different matter.”

“A different matter?”

“This is a ‘royal’ academy that runs on public money, right? No matter how wildly it spends, that money is not going to dry up so easily. If its finances are in the red, there must be a good reason for it. And not something as insignificant as getting a kickback for purchasing unnecessary supplies.”

Then what was this about?

Elritta provided an answer to their question.

“War.”

“?”

“This is a different form of war.”

The Board Chairman's answer did not explain much of anything.

She must have realized that because the red suit girl added more.

"Ahem. Objects are everything in modern wars. Even if you gather tens of thousands of puny foot soldiers, they will be slaughtered if just one colossal nuke-resistant Object is deployed. That prevents any simpler power games. If the other side has one Object and we have three, then we know the result before the fighting begins and we demand they withdraw. That is the ideal form of the clean wars."

"So what? What does that have to do with the Academy?"

"Have you forgotten? Objects are nothing but technology and their development is influenced in large part by the subjects taught at the Academy. In fact, there are even rumors that an Object is being built in secret below the campus."

"Surely that isn't happening. We're not talking about that Councilor Flide who the online news couldn't quit talking about."

"Yes, that part is not actually true." Elritta grinned. "But it is possible to *make it appear true*."

They were approaching the crux of the matter.

"On average, constructing an Object costs 5 billion dollars. So if you have 5 billion dollars and the necessary technology, you can breed speculation that you are building an Object. And like I said, it is the number of Objects that decides modern battles. ...So what if you could fake the money part? Couldn't you scare the Capitalist Corporations or Information Alliance into withdrawing before actually fighting?"

"Ah."

This was all about the technological power and brand name of the Royal Techno Academy.

They could also fake or rewrite shipment records so it looked like they were getting iron ingots, heat resistant reactive materials, the various rare earths used in semiconductors, the silicon pellets needed for manufacturing high-

precision targeting lenses, the electromagnets used to seal the plasma inside the reactor, and other materials.

But the money was most important.

“So the Academy only had to make it look like the government was giving us money for a nonexistent secret project. For example, let’s say Person A buys a diamond from Person B online. What if they kept returning the money and diamond in the real world and repeating the online transaction? If you just looked at the purchase history, it would look like countless diamond deals going in just one direction with lots of money traveling from Person A to Person B. But since it was all misdirection using the same money and diamond, there would be no actual expenses.”

What if the same thing was done but to make it look like 5 billion dollars was changing hands?

Each time, it would look like there was another new Object there.

If it looked like 10 or 20 more cutting-edge Second Generations had been built, anyone would recognize the danger. And no matter how much the Academy denied it, suspicion would only grow that they had an Object construction base hidden below the campus.

A gold crown, a gold chalice, and a gold statue. Show them off one at a time and it might look like a pile of treasure, but that cost nothing if you simply melted down and reshaped the same gold each time.

“The actual flow of money is quite complex and there are also faked records for materials and personnel to give at more verisimilitude when the data is intercepted. That is the general idea. It moves from bank account to back account, from euros to dollars, and from cash to gold. Of course, the total amount does change slightly due to a variety of handling charges along the way. The talk of the Academy being in the red is meant to cover this up. ...However, this caught someone’s attention.”

Monica clearly had a head full of question marks as she elegantly grabbed a sandwich while the foil sat next to her.

But the answer came to Quenser first.

“Oh, I get it. Someone increased the total amount of those handling charges and whatnot to line their own pockets. This is a secret project, so the government can’t exactly hold a public investigation even if some of the money is being stolen. I mean, they have to be so very careful to trick the other world powers. If they announce the data about the 5 billion dollars was all just for show and demand the thief return the money, it would cause the delicate balance of military power to collapse. The political circumstances prevent the police or prosecutors from acting. In other words, it’s the perfect setup to steal all the tax money you want.”

Elritta turned around in his lap and held out an egg sandwich.

It was apparently a reward.

“Say ‘ah’,” said the little Board Chairman. She waited for Quenser to eat it before continuing. “That was why we acted behind the scenes to have the Black Uniforms drag the villain into the darkness. They would likely be imprisoned in a ‘nonexistent camp’ somewhere. My most trusted faculty members were working to gather evidence, but then the incident occurred.”

Quenser thought for a second before answering.

“...The attack on the beautiful Student Council President?”

“That one gave me a headache. It happened late at night, so it was too late by the time word reached me. She was given a heroic spin to perfectly cast all the teachers as villains. And I couldn’t explain the situation since I couldn’t reveal the secret project behind it all. Exactly like the villain wanted.”

Then what about that large man who had burst from the burning armored truck?

He may have been able to argue his case if he had tried, but he had kept his mouth shut to the end.

When the Board Chairman had intervened, he had thanked her with some quick eye contact and then used her as a shield.

But that had not worked as intended and he had been forced to flee from the crazed students.

And he had ended up writhing in pain on the ground after being shot in the leg with a nail gun.

Had he been clenching his teeth to protect the truth the entire time?

“You’re kidding, right? So even that infamous professor knew what was going on?”

“No, he’s just crazy. Like always.”

She was very clear on that point. And it was all the more impactful from a 10 year old.

But one person could not keep up with their casual back-and-forth.

“———”

Allen.

He slowly shook his head.

“That can’t be true. In the Golden Lion Club, the President said she was going to save the teachers. She said she would work out who was lining their pockets with the misappropriated funds and safely end the conflict before a war like this broke out. That was our last hope, but the teachers rejected that peaceful resolution!!”

“Do you know what the villain called the high school Student Council President? Foie gras. She was fattened up for the slaughter. They had everything set up for her. Simply put, everything she had found was a school play script prepared by the villain.”

“I...we...! We shot at the teachers!! We hurt them! And now you’re saying they did nothing wrong and they were victims!? How am I supposed to accept that now!?”

“That is why I hoped to stop you sooner. This was not your fault. The blame rests with me for weighing politics against the students and hesitating to reveal the truth. Yet I should have known this would happen if I remained silent.”

Elritta seemed unable to even place a hand on agonized Allen’s shoulder.

He had to come to terms with what he had done on his own.

But redeeming himself for his crimes was a different matter.

“So who is it?”

“?”

“Who’s the villain? You made it sound like all the teachers are innocent and someone else is behind it all. I can’t just ignore that.”

“Oh, that.”

Elritta had the look of someone that was asked why one plus one was two and realized just how philosophical a question that was.

“That is obvious.”

And just like she was explaining that one plus one was two, she gave the answer.

“It is of course Headmaster Cliff French-Connection.”

## Part 5

Headmaster Cliff French-Connection.

“Another name I don’t know,” groaned Quenser in a corner of the sunset-dyed gym.

Super-mini dress Monica, who worked as an idol, apparently did not recognize it either, so Allen explained.

“Just like the Board Chairman, he was appointed as Headmaster quite recently. And while the position of Board Chairman has been given to the Champs-Élysées family for generations, the Headmaster is publicly recruited from civilian corporate executives. The idea is for nobles and commoners to join together and create the nation’s treasures. It’s actually such a simple pretext for gathering power that it would seem unrealistic in entertainment.”

“There was actually a condition for replacing my grandmother with me,” spat out Elritta. “Since it was assumed someone my age could not handle the complexities of running the Academy, a specialist in financial transactions was appointed as a new Headmaster. But he noticed and began abusing the false funding plan far too quickly. It’s possible he had his eye on it for a while beforehand. And in that case...”

“?”

“My grandmother’s stroke starts to sound suspicious.”

She said it in a low voice.

Elritta was very clear in what she said and her voice contained hatred unthinkable for a 10-year-old girl.

“He is pretending to be on the teachers’ side while he avoids the fighting, but he is also using his mobile device to act as a student and stir up more fighting. All while guiding the students to target areas that will not place him in danger. I

tried destroying some of the communications equipment, but it did not seem to work. The students and teachers both have tons of pirate antennas and he might also be using antennas located outside the Academy's grounds. Cutting out Cliff's duplicitous tongue will not be easy."

"Hold on," said Quenser. "This...Cliff was it? It's probably going to take me a while to remember some old guy's name. Anyway, why is the Headmaster even still on campus???"

"You don't know?" Monica pouted her lips with her foil sitting next to her. "Were you not listening, servant? The Headmaster is agitating the students into eliminating the teachers investigating his misdeeds. That way he can eliminate the evidence of financial malpractice. He has to remain in harm's way until that is complete."

"But he's manipulating people through a mobile device, right? Then couldn't he cross the fence and have the police protect him while he hides his smartphone behind his back and agitates the students with it?"

"Ah."

Allen's mouth fell open in obvious realization.

And Quenser shrugged.

"He might be setting the teachers up to be slaughtered, but the students are only amateurs. It's not exactly a sure thing. Don't you think there have to be some cleverer ways of handling it? For example...yeah. The Academy's biology lab building is developing bacteriological weapons, so he could claim the entire campus...no, all of Paris is at risk. He just has to tell the military that there will be no stopping an outbreak unless they don't hurry up and chuck a thermobaric bomb onto the Academy to heat treat it all."

"That is certainly a horrifically devilish idea."

Elritta gulped and gave that assessment from his lap.

That student was the same as always.

"But the Headmaster hasn't done that despite being a devil. He's put such a largescale plan into action and he hasn't made any major mistakes yet, so I



doubt it's because he has a conscious or because he's too stupid to come up with the idea. There has to be a good reason why he can't just raze the Academy to the ground and why he has to stay here."

"I see. It almost makes it sound like he's searching for something. I can practically see him skulking in the shadows and preparing for some kind of search."

But what exactly was he searching for?

Quenser, Allen, and Monica all looked to Elritta sitting in Quenser's lap.

That Board Chairman looked puzzled at first, and then...

"Are you suggesting it's me? No, that can't be it. It might sound heroic to have the Board Chairman and Headmaster as the kings in a life-size game of chess, but I seriously doubt I am that valuable at the moment. I was never able to find any proof of Cliff's financial malpractice."

"No," cut in Quenser. "If he thought you were worthless, he wouldn't still be here manipulating everyone. Remember what he's done. If we assume all of the students' actions have been under his control, then he was the one who convinced them the Headmaster and Board Chairman were the villains here. That means he put himself in danger to apply pressure to Elritta. Why? There has to be a reason."

"Wait." Allen, who had been one of the manipulated students, rubbed his chin as he began thinking for himself after freeing himself from that yoke. "There is one place the students would attack first if we thought the Board Chairman was our enemy: her office. We might find here there, but even if we didn't, we could smash up her stuff to work off our frustrations. But if we were manipulated to think that way..."

"It would be perfect for the Headmaster. He could enter that normally-restricted area, pull out all the desk drawers, pull up all the carpet, and check behind the cabinets without anyone knowing he had been there. Because the place had already been trashed."

"Again!" frantically cut in Elritta. She was desperately trying to course correct as they strayed in an odd direction. "That doesn't make sense. If I had Cliff's

Achilles heel, none of this mess would have happened. I have nothing. If I had evidence of his financial malpractice using that secret project, I would have climbed over the fence and handed it over to the military. Then the Black Uniforms could have imprisoned him in a ‘nonexistent camp’!”

“ ...”

“Listen, you mustn’t rely on false hope just because things seem hopeless. Cliff excels at showing illusions of straw to drowning people. That’s how he’s manipulating the students with his mobile device and that’s how he mocked the high school Student Council President as Foie Gras and had her find a school play...script...”

She trailed off.

She suddenly stopped speaking.

“That’s it.” Quenser snapped his fingers. “I knew something seemed off about that to me. The pieces didn’t fit together right. The attack on the beautiful Student Council President would make for some sensational news and it would inspire exactly the kind of anger needed to agitate and control the students. ... But doesn’t it seem like a little much? Would the Headmaster really attack her just as a trigger? Doing it himself would be risky and tricking someone else into doing his dirty work isn’t what a villain like him would do.”

“But it was as effective as he could ever have hoped, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, and Operation Foie Gras was very real,” said Elritta. “Unfortunately, everything she found was a script created by Cliff. None if it led back to the real secret project.”

It did not sound like she was lying.

But Quenser breathed in and out.

He had no evidence.

But he said it anyway.

“Are you sure about that?”

“What???”

“It may have begun as a school play script. He may have mocked her with the name Foie Gras. But that decoy project was prepared by the Headmaster, right? That means there was a link between the beautiful Student Council President and the Headmaster, albeit a thin and twisted one. So she might have actually found the answer. She might have made it past the decoy and found the reason why he had to create that school play in the first place. And if so...”

“The President really was looking at the secret project?” said Allen in a daze.

Quenser nodded.

“Or she started catching glimpses of it and the Headmaster panicked and attacked her before she found any more. And if someone investigated that, it could easily lead back to him, so what was he to do? What kind of mayo would he slather on that rotten food to hide the flavor?”

“Are you saying that’s why he split the Academy between students and teachers!?”

He had started a war to hide his crimes.

It was crazy, but it was true no one had made it back to his crimes.

A lot of people were lost in a war, so who would notice an extra person or two had died?

“While everyone is fighting, he can stroll through the off-limits areas and search for the secret file in the already-damaged school buildings. And that includes both the space shared with commoners and the space exclusive to nobles. Hey, Board Chairman, which one is...whatever that old shit is named?”

“He is a commoner. Since he was meant as an opposite to a noble like me.”

“And if he was a financial specialist, I doubt he had any special technical qualifications,” added Allen.

“Exactly. He’ll be paranoid the beautiful Student Council President left something behind,” continued Quenser. “But even if he wants to comb through the entire Academy for his treasure hunt, there are a lot of places he can’t go, like the labs and salons. But he can’t allow that. So he made his move. Now he can search anywhere: the Student Council Room, the Board Chairman’s Office,

the labs, the clean rooms, the girls locker room, and so on. He can even strut right into the highly restricted and recorded areas that deal directly in Object tech research. This is his biggest chance.”

“Then, Quensette, if we can find the President’s hidden file before Cliff...”

“It’s checkmate. We can end this manufactured war between the students and teachers.”

They had seen something.

It was the bright light of hope.

“Wait.”

But Board Chairman Elritta cut in.

Once she had their attention, she carefully continued.

“That sounds great and all, but there is no actual evidence, right? The existence of a secret file hidden at the Academy and the idea that the President had seen what lay beyond the school play are both no more than assumptions.”

“True enough,” agreed Quenser. “But I can’t imagine any other reason that devil of a Headmaster would still be here in the Academy. Also...”

“Also?”

“Hey, Allen. The rumored beautiful Student Council President is pretty, sexy, smart, athletic, rich, a noble with an impeccable upbringing, popular, kind as can be, and just all-around perfect, right? Do you really think someone like her would be entirely duped by an ugly old guy like Cliff? Do you really believe she was called Foie Gras and taken out of the picture for something as silly as money and authority???”

“Heh.”

Only after hearing that did Allen finally laugh quietly.

He had yet to recover from the shock of having shot innocent teachers, but he may have been trying to make progress in his own way.

“You’re right. Could a beautiful flower like that really be so easily plucked by some greasy old guy? That just doesn’t sound right at all.”

“That settles it then.” Quenser snapped his fingers. “If I have to flip the coin of fate, I’m betting on the hot girl. Win and I can grin like an idiot, lose and I can smile in resignation and die. This unseen hidden file sounds worth searching for to me.”

Elritta, who sat in his lap, and Monica, who was eating a spicy chicken sandwich, exchanged a disgusted look. They clearly did not want to have someone bet their lives on that heroic but ugly logic.

So Quenser said more.

“Y’know, Elritta, you’re a part of this too.”

“?”

“It may have been the beautiful Student Council President’s secret file that clinched it, but the Headmaster was also cautious of your actions. He probably mistakenly assumed you were working with the President to track down evidence of his misdeeds. Or maybe the President really did try to send the secret file to you using some unseen route. Otherwise, I see no reason the Headmaster would trick the students into attacking your office. It would have made more sense to attack the Student Council Room instead. But he focused on your office instead.”

“A line between me and the President? There is one possibility.”

If they knew what that was, they might be able to get ahead of the Headmaster and bring an end to the conflict between students and teachers. Finding the secret file hidden somewhere in the Academy would change everything.

But something else happened before Elritta could give them a specific answer.

The fellow(?) students occupying the gym approached them.

Those boys and girls held the thick metal poles used to support a volleyball net or the sport rifles used for clay pigeon shooting.

“Are you about done?”

“Excellent work. That’s her right? The villain who attacked the President?”

“We can’t decide whether to interrogate her in the soundproofed music room

or publicly execute her on the sports ground. Either way, it would be best to let everyone see us arrest her. It'll improve morale."

They were grinning.

There was disgusting, sticky hatred and dark joy on their faces.

Quenser sighed and found they were already surrounded by more than 10 boys and girls.

Even if those students did not understand what Quenser's group was talking about and even if they made no attempt to understand, it must have been clear they were getting along with Elritta.

And those students were still affected by the Headmaster's manipulation, so they must have hated anyone who had anything to do with the Board Chairman.

"I should've expected this. If I was the Headmaster, I would've made sure of it."

"What do we do, servant? We cannot afford to lose Elritta here, but beating down every single one of them like something from a kung fu movie seems a tad optimistic."

Monica spoke cautiously to him even as she reached for her stun sabre.

Quenser kept his head stationary and moved just his eyes to check the situation.

They were near the wall and the exit was quite close by. But they would have to break free of the surrounding students to get there. If they just went for it, they would be ganged up on and, even if they were lucky enough to get past that human wall, they would only be shot in the back by projectile weapons. A distance of a few meters held absolute meaning here.

Plus, escaping while covering for Monica and young Elritta was entirely hopeless. Escaping was impossible unless they were willing to make a sacrifice.

But even with that in mind, Quenser grinned.

"Let's go the kung fu movie route."

A stir ran through the boys and girls surrounding them and through Allen and Monica as well.

Quenser ignored them and continued.

“Isn’t it great that projectile weapons are allowed nowadays? People don’t bat an eye at people holding twin handguns sideways and firing away in their kung fu movies. By the way, this here is my weapon. It’s a slingshot bow gun made from a bicycle tire tube.”

The student lowered Elritta from his lap and slowly stood up.

“It can only punch through a 3cm-thick piece of plywood from 20 meters, but you can do something nifty with it. Replace the arrowhead with a glass fiber bag and you can give it additional effects: explosives, liquid nitrogen, tear gas, sulfuric acid, naphtha, whatever. There are a lot of neat ways to use it, but my current recommendation is this: titanium tetrachloride and a few other chemicals.”

The fact that Quenser was armed with a bow may have been why the surrounding mob was so confident. He would have to nock an arrow and pull back the string to use it. And they could shoot him if he showed any sign of doing so.

And so they made a mistake.

He dropped the glass fiber bag the size of a ping pong ball and crushed it underfoot.

Then there was only his voice.

“In other words, a smokescreen. Although you don’t see it as much these days because CG is used for everything.”

The color white filled their vision.

While surrounded by coughing, Quenser started by grabbing Elritta’s little hand and pulling hard. Then he shoved on Monica’s back to strongly suggest she head for the gym’s closest exit just a few meters away. He did not have time to worry about Allen, but he was a boy. He would have to figure something out on his own.

Dry sounds rang out from all around.

Angry voices shouted one after another.

“Dammit! Where are they!?”

“Stop, you idiots! We’ll just shoot each other!!”

It would have been dangerous if the students had lined up on one side and fired randomly into the smokescreen, but they had not done that. That gathering of fools had fully surrounded the table without considering line of fire, but some of them were at least smart enough to stop before they caused any friendly fire. The Academy students were wonderful.

Meanwhile, Quenser heard a few sounds like neon lights bursting within the smokescreen. Those would be Monica’s foil. Some of the students had been masses of muscle in colorful judo uniforms, but they could not wield their full strength in this situation.

Quenser used the confusion to slip past the students, find his way to the metal door, slide it open with a tackle, and burst outside.

The orange of sunset dazzled his eyes.

And outside, the teachers had an armored truck equipped with a pressurized gas cannon that vaporized liquid nitrogen so it expanded in volume.

“Goddammiiiiiiiiiiiiit!!”

Quenser crouched down, grabbed Monica and Elritta’s clothes, and dove behind a flowerbed elevated above the ground with stacked bricks.

He once more ignored Allen.

Just after he assumed that boy would be fine, a rapid series of horrifying dull sounds burst out.

It did not seem to be targeting Quenser’s group.

It was generally tearing down the gym’s wall. First, it opened a hole the size of a basketball and then tore down the surrounding wall from there. Allen was just about blown away by the shockwave alone, but he finally managed to dive behind the flower bed. He just about landed on top of the foil Monica had



placed on the ground, so she quickly switched it off.

There must have been something wrong with Allen's internal pressure because he had a slight nosebleed as he shouted at Quenser.

"That's sexist! You need to save me too!!"

"Look, I've got a girl in each hand. That's how the world is supposed to work. Besides, you managed fine on your own. But anyway, the students and teachers are about to clash, so let's use that as a distraction while we sneak away behind this row of flower beds."

Meanwhile, red-suited Elritta stuck out her tongue in disgust.

"Ugh, peh, peh!! What was that smoke? My mouth feels all prickly or like it's full of something spicy. I want to wash it out with water..."

"I can't exactly say that smokescreen was good for your health, but you sure are sensitive. It looked like you were avoiding any amount of pepper with those sandwiches. Even though the sweetness is stronger with the honey mustard chicken."

"I know I need to overcome this. But my body just refuses to accept it."

Elritta pouted her lips, so he gave her a pat on the head before moving onto their next action.

While a legitimate firefight broke out, Quenser's group turned the other way and worked to escape the battleground. Angry shouts and screams filled the air.

"You bastards think you're so great just because you've got a turret on the roof!!"

"Bring out the ballista! Use that and we can blast right through the teachers' armor! Target that turret!!"

"Now, as you can see, the power of a gun is heavily reliant on pressure management, so..."

"Gulp!! There he is! It's that infamous professor from the max difficulty setting!!"

Elritta looked back several times while Quenser pulled on her hand.

“The teachers don’t seem to have completely lost it yet. Well, except for that one freak. They probably blew a hole in the wall because they think I am being imprisoned in the gym.”

“...”

Her comment put a bitter look on Allen’s face. It may have reminded him of what he had done.

“Is there any building that isn’t occupied by either side?”

“That won’t be easy to find. At this stage, both sides are fighting over everything, even the filthy boys bathrooms in the clubroom building.”

“Hey, Allen, if we reach the chemistry lab building, there will be plenty of Geiger counters lying around, right? Can’t we tamper with a sensor to trigger an alarm from a CT scanner, an experimental hadron collider, or something else with that mark on it? That’ll send everyone running away in a hurry. Then we’ll have the perfect secret base.”

“Have you forgotten everything in the Academy is being weaponized right now? Everything usable is already in use. And if we fake some dangerous-looking data, they’ll actually rush in there with hazmat suits on.”

It was looking difficult to secure a sanctuary or safe zone.

Unable to move on or head back, they began a strategy meeting behind a roadside tree which provided no real defense.

The tiny Board Chairman waved her hand.

“The bigger problem is the Student Council President’s secret file. We need to find it before Headmaster Cliff does.”

“It looks like he thinks he can find the secret file if he captures you. Any ideas there?”

“I started to say it before.” Elritta held her index finger to her chin. “But I have actually asked the Student Council Presidents of the elementary school, middle school, high school, university, and graduate school to tutor me afterschool. While keeping it a secret from the other students, of course.”

“Tutoring you? The Board Chairman of the best technical school there is!?”

“Have you forgotten? Even if you call me a prodigy, I am still a 10-year-old kid. I need to focus on my own education even as I run the Academy.”

Elritta did not hesitate to state this.

She was willing to admit her own inexperience and reduce the status known as pride. And that alone made her seem plenty mature.

“Still, that would be a bad look for the Academy, so I can’t make it public. And it also helps them. The Presidents are both students and leaders. Being a genius at learning is not enough. We must support and occasionally test their talents at teaching.”

“So the beautiful Student Council President would have used something related to that, huh?”

“We always met at different locations because a single set location would stand out too much. Each of the Presidents made the teaching materials on their own computer.”

“But Cliff would have thought of something like that almost immediately.”

“What about the printer they used to print it out? Next to the high school Student Council Room is a storage closet...well, it’s more of a storeroom for outdated equipment that would be too expensive to have removed. Anyway, there is an old, yellowed industrial printer gathering dust there. Printers like that gather temporary data in their internal memory. It became something of a problem when people realized you could take data from a printer’s residual memory to avoid hacking through the strict security of a computer system’s server. The Presidents all used retired printers to leave as few hints as possible.”

“So...”

“Are you saying it’s possible some unnatural data has been placed in that memory?” asked Monica. “So you could hit a button to have it print out the entire secret file?”

They all exchanged a glance.

They finally had a clear objective.

They were no longer just firing projectiles at random or aimlessly fleeing.

“The Student Council Room. There are officially an equal number of nobles and commoners on the council, but in reality, the President and Vice President are always nobles and the main room is in the nobles-only area. Under normal circumstances, I’d have an easier time getting into the girls shower room than there.”

“We are only talking about the storeroom next door, so you need not degrade yourself so much, servant. (Really, you just need to serve me alone instead of worrying about everyone else. Mutter, mutter.)”

“Okay, let’s check the place out. Allen, where’s the Student Council Room!? The storeroom is right next to it!”

“Isn’t this your school too, Quensette!? But, yeah, it’s pretty far away. It’s in the special classroom building instead of the general school building, so it’s on the other side of campus. It’s enough for me to wish there was a bike share or community bus around here. Of course, it’s sure to be crawling with students and teachers. And it doesn’t matter which side fires the bullet; it’ll kill you just the same.”

“But we have to do this.”

“Wait, wait. Stop trying to look cool and face reality, servant. Crossing that wide-open lawn would be suicide. A volleyball launcher is firing bombs from the roof and experimental laser vehicles meant to shoot down drones are driving around. There’s no escape once they lock onto us. They’ll turn us into human torches at the speed of light.”

Elritta listened to their conversation and then glanced thoughtfully to the side.

And then she spoke.

“There is a way.”

“?”

“There are underground maintenance tunnels for the fiber optic cables connecting all of the buildings together. The students are not even aware they

exist and the teachers might have heard them mentioned at most. Because the installation and maintenance is all handled by outside contractors. No one knows where the exact entrances and exits are, so I doubt anyone will be watching them.”

“You doubt? We have to risk our lives on that level of uncertainty!?”

“I said I tried to cut off communications a few times, didn’t I? I followed the VIP emergency evacuation manual into the underground area and snipped the fiber optic cables with nail clippers, but no one saw me. I just can’t guarantee that no one discovered them since.”

Once Elritta finished her businesslike explanation, she added one last thing.

She gave a personal opinion.

“I still find it hard to believe, but if that Student Council President really was more than foie gras and tried to leave something for me, I cannot let it go to waste. I won’t let Cliff destroy it this time.”

## Part 6

The fiber optic installation and maintenance pathways were accessed through manholes around campus. But unlike the ones leading to the general sewer, these had no hole for inserting an opener.

“You open them by attaching an electromagnet as a handhold and then rotating it twice to the right, three times to the left, and four times to the right.”

They followed the instructions to open one of the manholes and climbed down the flimsy ladder. Quenser took the lead with the girls following. Allen went last. Quenser descended the ladder with a thoughtful look on his face, made sure to get a good look up Monica’s super-mini dress as she followed him down, and got a heel to the face for his trouble. Elritta and Allen safely climbed down while that scum writhed around on the floor. Then they worked to secure a route like usual.

They found a narrow tunnel lit by a faint emergency exit sign. It was two meters tall and a meter wide at best. Cables encased in plastic were bundled together by the dozen and running along the walls and ceiling. That only applied further pressure.

Action movies often claimed blades were more powerful than projectiles in narrow spaces, but was that really true? Quenser felt no desire to trade his slingshot bow gun for Monica’s stun sabre.

“It’s like a labyrinth below the Academy. I bet I could film an entire movie down here.” Allen sounded annoyed. “But I don’t feel any safer. Aren’t we in trouble if we run into the enemy in here?”

“That depends on who you mean by ‘the enemy’. But check the wall here, Allen.”

“?”

“Some of the thick layer of dust has been scraped off. Someone must have passed through here.”

Quenser, Allen, and Monica exchanged a glance.

Then they turned toward Elritta.

“It couldn’t have been me. That mark is higher than my head.”

“Then did either the teachers or students found this place?”

“If so, a patrol would’ve found us and turned us to Swiss cheese. But that hasn’t happened. Besides, the marks on the walls and footprints on the floor don’t look like a large group is frequently moving through here. It looks more like a single person.”

“Then...wait, does that mean what I think it does?”

“I was thinking the same thing, Monica. No matter how good he is at manipulation, it still seemed odd that the Headmaster was staying out of harm’s way so well, but he must have known the same secret route as the Board Chairman.”

In that case, it seemed unlikely that Headmaster Cliff French-Connection would tell the students or teachers about the secret path. Send an angry mob in here and he would lose his safe route.

That said, they could not deny the possibility of the Headmaster leaving some “presents” using tripwires or infrared sensors. In the worst case, they could have been blown up by a grenade the instant they opened the manhole. They felt an even greater pressure in their stomachs as they cautiously walked down the narrow tunnel.

Fortunately, they never had to battle some colorful wires with a pair of pliers.

But they had not known that in advance. It wore at their nerves to slowly walk through the limited lighting while feeling enough tension to affect their breathing, but they finally arrived below the high school special classroom building.

“Assuming nothing has changed, the students control this building,” said Allen. “It’s become an armory thanks to the tools in the tech room and home ec

room. And we'll be seen as enemy soldiers since we have the Board Chairman with us. Once we poke this hornet's nest, there is no going back."

"It's the same wherever we go. We won't be welcomed by the students or the teachers."

They opened the manhole while discussing it.

And they found themselves in a corner of a school hallway.

After being so cautious inside the underground passageway, night had truly fallen once they emerged, but they could not worry about the lack of light or the ghosts of the night.

They were much more bothered by the intensely hot wind that seemed to scorch their hair.

"Dwah!!"

"Don't breathe in! This is bad!!"

They closed the manhole again, waited a bit, covered their mouths and noses with handkerchiefs, and opened it again.

Hell awaited them.

The improperly sealed wooden flooring had turned to charcoal and the windows had melted. The hallway wallpaper had burned and the linoleum floor had bubbled up and then solidified again.

Simply standing there sent a dull pain racing across their skin. Sweat immediately poured from their bodies. They felt no desire to carelessly touch the walls. They had likely absorbed all the heat like a furnace after the fire had been put out.

Quenser checked the tag of his blazer. Fortunately, it was made from natural materials. Wearing a track suit or other garment made from synthetic fibers would not be a good idea here. Having the clothing meant to protect you melt like cheese and cling to you was the stuff of nightmares.

"Wait, wait, wait. Did they blast the place with naphtha or something?"

"Doesn't look like it," said Allen while restlessly messing with his phone.



The heat may have been affecting it, but his number had yet to be removed from the students' list.

"Apparently a teacher is driving around in a truck loaded with an experimental laser. It's been firing on this building intermittently, so all the students have evacuated. Since it's an armory, I imagine it's a high priority target."

"This is bad, but it's also our chance."

Quenser and Allen removed their jackets and placed them over Monica and Elritta. They were unsure how effective that would be, but they could not ignore the damage the heat would do to their skin.

"So where's the Student Council Room?"

"On the east side of the second floor."

Elritta tried to remove the coat because it was so hot, but Quenser and Allen stopped her because they were already feeling the pain of excessive sunbathing after just a few minutes. Quenser glanced down at his slingshot bow gun made from a tire tube. He was worried the heat would cause it to deteriorate. They had to consider Allen's *electric* nail gun and Monica's *stun* sabre as well. They both had electronics embedded in them to amplify their power, so they were weak to heat.

They were glad to see the students really had evacuated. They did not run across a bunch of students collapsed in the hallway.

They ran up the stairs toward the Student Council Room.

They gathered around the entrance to the adjacent storeroom.

It was locked, but unlike the Student Council Room, it was a simple design that combined the lock with the knob. It was the kind that locked by pressing a button on the inside. Quenser easily opened it by whacking the knob with his slingshot bow gun and causing the spring-loaded clasp to come undone with a pleasant noise.

But then they ran into a problem.

Thus spoke super-mini dress Monica:

“Servant, hurry up and open the door. Did I fail to properly beat a sense of ‘ladies first’ into you?”

“Shut the hell up, Lady Monica. ...Oh, god that’s hot!!!???”

Quenser grumbled, but when he touched the metal knob, it produced a sizzling sound like from Chinese cooking. He immediately yanked his hand back and Elritta handed him the handkerchief that had been covering her mouth.

“You intentionally set him up for that, didn’t you?” she said. “It’s like an oven in here, so touching any kind of metal is suicide.”

“So what do we do? Kick it down?”

“There is no need to go that far. It shouldn’t be problem if you wrap a thick cloth around your hand first. It’s the same idea as a potholder.”

He tried again using his coat.

“Do you have any idea how valuable an engineer’s fingers are?” complained Quenser.

“Oh? Not as important as a lady’s delicate fingers,” replied Monica.

The space was about half the size of a classroom. Just like Elritta had said, it looked a lot like a dumping ground for old electronics. Dusty and yellowed fans, LCD monitors, air conditioners, refrigerators, and microwaves had been thrown inside, leaving little space to walk. There were piles of old junk here and there, but they wanted to stay away from the ones stacked higher than they were tall. Those could collapse at any moment.

There was no window.

They had to rely on the backlight of Allen’s smartphone, but that also helped keep the heat of the laser from getting inside.

They finally found relief.

“Servant.” Twintail Monica tossed Quenser the coat he had placed over her head. “You said we need to find an old printer, but will it even function in this environment? It’s probably already overheated and it might have already been fried.”

“It’s hard to say. This room is relatively protected, so we just have to pray it still works.”

“That’s it in the corner there. Let’s try plugging it in.”

Elritta pointed at the kind of large laser printer seen in offices and convenience stores. It came up to their waists, it had several buttons and joystick-like things, and it also had a long, narrow stand supporting an LCD screen the size of a car navigation system or a bath television.

“It’s a mess by the walls too. It’s too dark to see, but is this the power outlet? Okay, it’s plugged in, Quensette!”

“Servant.”

“Yes, yes. I’ll do it, I’ll do it. ...Abyaha!?”

“Hey, be careful. The outlets in here are ungrounded. Get careless and you’re in for a shock.”

Quenser glared at the tomboy idol, but she whistled with a nonchalant look inspecting her carefully manicured nails.

Quenser nervously touched the device while wondering how exactly he was supposed to be careful with this. But...

“It works. The screen just lit up.”

They had been reliant on the phone backlight before, but a new light faintly but undeniably revealed the interior. The screen contained flashing messages asking for new paper and ink. They checked around the room and found a set of materials in one corner, presumably left there by the President and whoever else used it.

Elritta spoke while watching them open and fill the drawer-like slots.

“I believe it takes some special software to directly view the temporary memory. It would be faster to set it to print out the cache data.”

“Yeah, but don’t we have to see it to know which file is the one?”

“That is why we need to print them all out.”

Once they pressed the large “confirm” button, the motor rumbled and the

work began.

They wanted the secret file the Student Council President had hidden there. That would be the proof needed to reveal the Headmaster's financial malpractice, but that of course was not the very first thing printed out.

Most of it was completely worthless data.

But that did not mean it was also meaningless.

Board Chairman Elritta Champs-Élysées had said the various Presidents secretly tutored her afterschool. They had used their computers to create teaching materials and then printed them out here.

It was obvious at a glance.

This was different from someone showing off their knowledge with no real intention of explaining what it all meant. It was broken down with an obvious understanding of how to make it understandable and how to overcome common stumbling blocks and it included simple examples from real life.

Most of all, it was clear that they had not seen this as work.

They had enjoyed making these materials and you could almost imagine them eagerly typing it up with a smile on their face.

And there were a few notes in the margins that had nothing to do with academics.

"How to conquer spiciness!!"

"I can't just have her eat spicy things right away."

"Maybe combine it with other flavors?"

"Honey mustard chicken, tom yum, milk curry. The curry would probably be simplest."

Elritta had said she knew she had to overcome it.

She might still have trouble with it and she might not have overcome it right away.

But the sentiment had reached her.

And yet...

"I know this isn't like me."

"What is it, Quensette?"

"The Headmaster...what was his name? I'm not going to bother remembering some dirty old man's name, but that bastard attacked the person who wrote this. He tried to destroy everything contained here and all for his own personal greed."

"..."

They said nothing more for a while.

The printer continued outputting the kindness of the past.

They had to refill the paper a few times, but then things changed.

"Here it is. This is the file."

The total number of pages was listed as more than 200, so it would take a long time just to print. They grabbed each page as soon as it appeared in the tray and read through it.

Quenser honestly did not understand what all the detailed numbers meant. It was Board Chairman Elritta who grew excited upon reading it.

"This lists the entire flow of money, from the foreign bank accounts to the fictional shell companies. It's not exactly a good thing that she discovered this much about the false funding project...but it's still incredible. This is enough to track Cliff's actions. This has more than 400 digital footprints. Even if he tried to erase it all now, the Black Uniforms would catch him first. In fact, it looks a lot like he wouldn't even know all of the footprints he left behind."

"Hold on, wait. Then what's all this stuff still being printed out? If that was enough to ruin the Headmaster, why is the rest of this necessary? What more could there be?"

Something seemed off about all the additional pages the printer was still spitting out. They started to suspect the beautiful Student Council President had been given some false data.

“The Headmaster was trying to sell something?” Quenser frowned. “The deal was with the Information Alliance, the price was 20 million Legitimacy Kingdom euros, and the item was...what? A bunch of data???”

“Wait, is this a joke?” Elritta grimaced when she read the paper from the side. “The false funding project was joint government and civilian information warfare that made it look like 5 billion dollars was changing hands to trick the enemy into thinking a nonexistent Object was in development which would confuse their long-term military strategies.”

“Hm? What about it?”

“That requires more than just the money. It also has to be convincing and trustworthy. The enemy has to believe that location could build an Object given that sum of money. That was why our Academy was used. It is the Legitimacy Kingdom’s greatest technical school where we raise our greatest technical minds. It has enough of a reputation to start rumors of an Object construction facility existing below it. But what if that technical institute only existed as online data meant to make it convincing and trustworthy?”

They all exchanged a glance.

An unpleasant feeling filled the entire room.

“If they can fake both the 5 billion dollars and the technical institute, then the false funding project is no longer exclusive to the Legitimacy Kingdom. Any of the world powers could do the same.”

“Wait! What would Cliff gain from doing that!? He wasn’t just blinded by that one payment of cash, was he!?”

“He was already taking advantage of the Legitimacy Kingdom project in order to line his pockets with a portion of the public money, right?” Monica tapped the floor with her foil. “Then the more such projects are active, the more opportunities he has to make some of that money his. If he rattles the Legitimacy Kingdom by having the other world powers do the same thing, the Legitimacy Kingdom will have no choice but to begin even more bluffs. So he does profit from it in the long run, doesn’t he?”

“B-but the false funding project was top secret, right!? Sell the method to the

other world powers and they'll realize it's all fake! If the bluff stops working, the project ends. Then he loses his source of income, right!?"

"Not necessarily," cut in Board Chairman Elritta. "Basically, he just has to sell the method to the Information Alliance while hiding that the Legitimacy Kingdom is already using it. He tells them they can use the method to be the first in the world to use that unprecedented strategy. He tells them they can use it to fool the Capitalist Corporations, the Faith Organization...and most importantly, the Legitimacy Kingdom. From there, a false funding arms race will break out. Neither side is aware they are being shown an illusion as they accelerate their own false funding project with cold sweat dripping down their smiling faces."

Once that happened, no one would know the total number of Objects in the world.

Those weapons could destroy the world and drive humanity to extinction several times over and no one would know how many each world power possessed. It would be an age of chaos.

The thought disgusted Quenser and he spoke his mind.

"I can see why the Headmaster is panicking."

"Yes, so can I."

"I mean, what crime would he even be charged with? The false funding project itself is top secret and has its roots in the military. Simply lining his pockets with public money is a pretty serious crime, but he's also selling those secrets to another world power and creating the risk of an enemy information warfare campaign that could affect us for decades. That has to be embezzlement, leaking classified information, and either treason or instigation of foreign aggression. If this goes public, his prison sentence will be in the quadruple digits."

"Why did he want money that badly? Bank robberies are not common, but not because people do not need money. It's because the risk is too great and they will probably be caught before they can use the money."

Twintail Monica sounded shocked, but they received an answer from an

unexpected place.

After picking up the next printed page, Elritta read through it and froze.

“...”

“Is there more?”

“Read this. Although even I find it hard to believe.”

“?”

Quenser and Monica looked at the paper the tiny Board Chairman held.

It was apparently a list of the shell companies used in the digital transaction.

One was registered with its headquarters in the Capitalist Corporations.

However...

“An Object sharing fund? You mean that thing where everyone gathers enough money to sponsor a 5 billion dollar Object and profit from its use!?”

“I was wondering where he put all that money.” Elritta had to shrug at this point. “Cliff was trying to acquire his own Object. He wanted more than simple money; he wanted a much greater power!!”

It was hard to tell how much of this was a realistic conspiracy and how much was an overblown fantasy.

“Is this the unique greed of commoners?” asked Quenser with a cynical smile. “The worst part is I kind of sympathize with his goal here. His methods couldn’t be worse, though.”

The beautiful Student Council President must have been just as taken aback by the scope of the conspiracy she had unearthed. She must not have expected to find it went so deep. The secret file had some smaller notes jotted down in the margins.

“I’m scared.”

“I can’t ask for help here.”

“I would only be dragging them into this.”

She may have tried to stop several times along the way. She may have tried to



obey the tremor running through her body and pretend she had never seen anything.

But she had not done that.

The secret file existed to the very last page as proof of what she had accomplished on her own.

She had to have considered the possibility of being attacked.

Why had she stuck with it so far?

The reason for her lonely fight was written there in the margins.

“But I can’t leave that girl all alone.”

“...”

It could not have been more obvious who “that girl” alluded to.

She was the leader of the Academy, but she was also a tutoring student.

And she was a 10-year-old girl.

The fear the President felt was all the more reason she could never shove it onto that girl’s shoulders. So she had continued through to the end and ultimately been attacked just as she had feared. Had she regretted her actions during her last moments of consciousness? Quenser felt certain she had smiled. Because she was glad it was her and not “that girl” who had been in harm’s way.

But that baton had not gone to waste.

No, whether or not it would go to waste was dependent on the actions of those who had received it.

“Hey, Allen.”

“What?”

“The President is a great girl, isn’t she?”

“Of course she is. You can belong to the Golden Lion Club and she’ll still be out of your league.”

And there was one rule the world had followed since ancient times.

The pieces of shit who hurt great girls were enemies of the entire human race.

## Part 7

Headmaster Cliff French-Connection felt impatient.

At first glance, everything seemed to be going according to plan and he appeared to be unilaterally manipulating the students and teachers from the safety of his throne, but all of his actions from the very beginning had been unplanned and adlibbed.

He had failed to turn young Board Chairman Elritta Champs-Élysées into his puppet.

He could not use her for cover and, now that he was finally using the false funding project to line his pockets with public money, Elritta's supporters had begun investigating the financial malpractice.

And then the high school Student Council President, who he had planned to guide into a dead end for Operation Foie Gras, had been on the verge of discovering his plans to sell the data to other world powers and fund a private Object.

Attacking her and accelerating the conflict between teachers and students was only a temporary measure.

He had successfully weakened Elritta's supporters among the teachers, but no matter how much he searched the school buildings, he could not find the Student Council President's crucial secret file.

It was all for show. He had no real power.

His position was identical to that of the nonexistent Objects.

And then...

(The high school special classroom building. Are they after the Student Council Room?)

He knew this because of the sensors he had set up in the underground fiber optic installation and maintenance passageways.

There was a simple reason why he had not hooked a bomb up to those sensors. If he created a delicate enough situation that a rat could trigger an explosion, he might accidentally clue the students and teachers into the existence of the tunnels. Plus, he was not stupid enough to create the risk of catching himself in his own trap. So he had avoided any lethal traps.

However, data on someone's location could be just as deadly depending on the situation.

Cliff clenched his teeth as he thought about it.

(Did I suspect it? Of course I did. I checked there again and again during all the chaos! I even used the experimental laser to drive out all the students I couldn't manipulate into leaving!! Yet I found nothing. Dammit, am I missing something here!?)

It honestly did not matter whether or not the secret file was in the Student Council Room.

Or even if it was anywhere in that building.

What mattered was that Elritta's group had used the secret underground passageways to enter that building and that they had likely acquired the secret file from somewhere.

In other words, if he killed them here – if he slaughtered everyone in Elritta's group – it would never see the light of day. It would all be over if he grabbed the secret file lying there next to the corpses.

He could not stay here forever.

Without that conclusive evidence, the military's Black Uniforms could not act. Same for the local police and prosecutors. If he crossed the fence and had the police protect him, he could lie his way through their questioning and then prepare to escape overseas. If he sold that data on the Academy to the Information Alliance, found his way somewhere he could use as a foundation for a similar false funding project, and stole enough public funding there, he could finally travel to the Capitalist Corporations. That world power determined

the meaning of justice and the hierarchy of civil liberties with cash and money, so he could buy an Object there.

The game only came to an end once that happened.

As long as he remained on the Academy's campus, he was still in the opening stage of the game.

He could not afford to screw up this initial step.

In his luxury suit, Cliff walked up to a snowplow with thick armor panels welded on and shouted to the silly-looking teacher inside it.

"Can we still not get inside!? There can't be any students left in there after using that laser so much! Taking back that building is a crucial step toward breaking their spirit and destroying their morale without any bloodshed!!"

The adults here were not Elritta's supporters. They were the poor lambs who were being pursued by the students just for being adults. That meant none of them viewed Cliff with any suspicion or hostility.

But this teacher shook his head.

"The laser has increased the temperature inside by a lot! Searching the inside would be far too dangerous!!"

"It's important!!"

"Maybe so, but it has to wait!! Safety has to come first!!"

(You dumbass!! What good is a pawn that's afraid to die!?)

Cliff just bout said that out loud, but he caught himself at the last second.

If they took too long here, Elritta's group would escape through the underground route once more. And with the secret file in hand. He had to avoid that at all costs. He has several sensors set up in that network of tunnels below the campus, but that was far from perfect. He could only make general guesses like "there were readings at Point A, Point B, and Point C in that order, so they are likely moving from west to east". If he misread something for whatever reason, they would escape. And if that happened and the secret file made it outside the fence and to the Black Uniforms, there would be no stopping it.

Cliff French-Connection's life would be over then and there.

(I have to settle this here. I must! I need to annihilate Elritta's group before they leave the high school special classroom building.)

Cliff suddenly looked up.

He focused on what he was using as a shield: the armored snowplow.

Of course, it was more than just a plow. Just like all the other vehicles out here, it had a handmade cannon attached.

And that was the very cannon which had transformed that entire building into a scorching furnace.

(Yes, that's what I'll do. Once I have the secret file, I can leave the Academy. So who cares what the people here think of me? If I use the title of Headmaster to earn people's trust, I can claim the students are preparing ABC weapons inside so the military will bomb the place to the ground. That will erase any negative image I might have earned. So why worry about standing out? Besides, in a battle like this, they won't have time to thoroughly investigate each and every deadly bullet.)

"Headmaster?"

"Sorry about this."

Cliff reached into his luxury suit's pocket just like someone pulling out a pack of cigarettes for a smoke.

But his hand emerged with a self-defense handgun in its grasp.

"I was a little confused for a bit there, but I should have just done this from the beginning."

Before the surprised driver could shut the armored door, that handgun fired a bullet, just like it had once before already.

## Part 8

They had the secret file.

But just as Quenser and the others left the old electronics storage room, they heard what sounded like a machinegun or a welding rod.

They instinctually ducked down lower than the windows.

“Wh-what is that!?”

“They’re doing something outside,” said Quenser. “But not on this floor. It’s lower down?”

“Oh, this is bad,” spat out Elritta.

They carefully approached the stairs while still feeling like they were swimming through the thick air of a sauna.

But they could not descend to the first floor.

The stairway was glowing a scorching orange.

“...”

The strange sound rang out once more. This time, they could also see something flashing like a strobe light or lightning strike while disturbing glowing marks were burned into the hallway walls and ceiling.

Those marks were 10cm squares.

When several of those burning orange marks covered the same spot, that area would lose its shape and spread out into a strange puddle like an amoeba.

“They’re using that experimental laser,” gulped Allen. “Now they’re attacking at the speed of light. This is powerful enough to shoot down a drone made of alloy, so if it locks onto a person, we’ll burst into flames!!”

And bursting into flames from a direct hit was not the only concern.

Frighteningly hot winds blew out from the center of the exposed area. The air was expanding at an explosive rate. And that deadly wind would destroy their throat and lungs if they breathed it in.

But that was not what the enemy was trying to do.

“The real problem is what they’re attacking.”

“Eh? What do you mean?” asked super-mini dress Monica.

Elritta answered with another sigh.

“There are no other students in this building. So assuming they aren’t firing at random, we are the targets here. But they started with the first floor. Why? What are they targeting?”

“Oh, I get it,” groaned Quenser. “They’re trying to seal up the manhole leading underground! If they melt enough materials on top of it, we won’t be able to open it!!”

“Like you said before, humans are helpless against lasers. Any escape route other than the tunnels will mean exposing ourselves on the wide-open lawn, so we would not stand a chance. And if we decide to hole up in the building, he can continue firing the laser to increase the temperature of this furnace. We will roast before we can try anything.”

“Hold on, wait. That strategy assumes knowledge of the manhole and underground passageways, doesn’t it?”

“Servant, are you saying that is who is controlling the laser?”

“Yes. It’s hard to imagine he would let anyone else know about those tunnels.” Quenser paused before continuing. “The Headmaster has finally made an appearance. Which means he’s feeling cornered!!”

The first floor hallway was scorching hot and there was nothing they could do hanging around near the stairs.

Quenser’s group returned to the second floor and started by observing the situation.

“Turn your phone off. Any light in the dark here would be suicide.”



“Fine, but we don’t have night-vision goggles.”

Quenser and Allen went on ahead while Monica and Elritta waited on the windowless stairway landing. They crouched down, carefully crossed the second floor hallway, and moved below one of the windows. They gathered up some of the glass that had melted and rehardened, and used it as a mirror to look out the window.

They used that glass like a periscope to view the outside from multiple angles.

“There it is. That’s the fat turkey.”

“Only you can see at that angle. How am I supposed to know what you mean?”

“It looks like a snowplow with armor panels attached. There’s something else on the back end. About 1.5 meters. Something like planetarium lenses are spinning around it. It kind of reminds me of our Princess’s Killer Squall.”

“I don’t know what that is. Give me that glass.”

Allen swiped the “mirror”, did the same thing Quenser had, and then groaned.

“It just had to be the Branding Iron, didn’t it? I thought that thing had been dismantled!”

“The Branding Iron?”

“You remember that infamous professor, right? It’s a handmade toy he put together. It’s a sphere containing several high-powered lasers made by strapping together 4x4 YAGs.”

“Hm? So was it originally a proof of concept model for a laser space elevator or something???”

“Do you really think something that harmless would be called the Branding Iron? That peaceful use was only the excuse he used on the paperwork. He was really building his own laser weapon on campus because he was fed up with the trouble caused by drones these days! He claimed he had to take things into his own hands since the law was taking too long to catch up. He was prepared to shoot down anything and everything that flew above campus without

permission, but the administration stopped him because of the threat it posed to civilian airplanes. Oh, and there was a rumor a wild bird preservation group made a fuss over it.”

“And that’s it there?”

“I’m guessing that old man pouted his lips like a child and refused to throw it out. And now some idiot dug it back up and installed it on the back of a plow. This is not going to be easy. I’ve seen that freak’s demonstration video. He made the video because he hoped a space opera would use it for inspiration. Its theoretical effective range is 400km and it can apparently force its way through the air’s weakening effect by combining several lasers together. Not that that matters much to those of us on the ground thanks to the horizon getting in the way. Still, he claims it can shoot down more than 20 targets with 98.8% accuracy. The video didn’t look faked, so I don’t think he was bluffing.”

Just then, the concentrated fire of lasers on the first floor came to a stop.

They had a bad feeling about this.

Then the Branding Iron’s square marks began to fill the second floor. The sound and light of welding came from the broken windows and the hallway’s opposite wall. Square orange lights lingered and a scorching wind burst out. The wallpaper was already discolored from the heat, but now its ends began to curl up and the heat burned the sprinklers on the ceiling which had burned out.

“Bwah!!”

“Don’t panic, Allen. This doesn’t mean he knows where we are. He was filling the entire building with light and heat, starting with the bottom, in hopes of smoking out the rats he knows are inside.”

Quenser pulled out a handkerchief and forced it over his awful friend’s mouth.

“Don’t breathe too deeply. Anti-air lasers are an everyday sight on Object battlefields. They’re dangerous, but you get used to it. Breathe small, shallow breaths. We need to get back to Monica and the Board Chairman.”

“Bleh. Objects have more than 100 of those covering them, right? How do you survive against something like that!?”

“Second Generations are specialized for fighting other Objects, so they have a surprising number of blind spots. It’s the First Generations you really have to worry about. That old style was designed to fight infantry and tanks. Just like that Branding Iron.”

If they raised their head too far, their skull would be vaporized.

But as long as the reinforced concrete of the outer wall was in the way, they could avoid instant death. They preferred not to imagine just how discolored the other side of that wall was, but it was more resistant to change than simple steel or plastic.

Once they made it back to the stairway landing where Monica and Elritta were crouched down waiting, they found the girls had gone entirely pale. Quenser debated whether the anxiety of not knowing or the fear of knowing was worse, but he ultimately decided to give a quick summary.

“S-servant. This is only the second floor. How about we escape through a window on the other side while he is busy firing the laser from the courtyard? It isn’t too high to jump down from.”

“It would be safer to use a curtain or something as a rope, but what good is escaping the building?” Quenser slowly exhaled. “In case you’ve forgotten, that armored snowplow is driving around and around the building. And it’s a wide open space out there. The nearest fence is a few hundred meters away, but we’re dead the instant he spots us. Crossing that aboveground route would be suicide. But feel free to try it if you think you can outrun the speed of light.”

“Ugh.”

“We have the secret file right here. If only we could get it to the authorities.”

Elritta held the thick stack of papers between her hands and bit her lip in frustration.

“Hey, Quensette, how about we snap photos of the documents and send that to the Black Uniforms outside?”

“With all this confusion, who’s going to believe blurry photos sent from a phone that anyone could have picked up? This data only carries any real weight when it’s handed over by the Board Chairman herself. That’s what makes it

trustworthy. Besides, using a phone in here means shining the backlight everywhere. And you would need the flash on to photo all that writing. We'd just get lasered before we were done."

"I know that, but what else can we do!?"

The crackling of the lasers squeezed at their chests. The sauna-like heat only continued to rise. At this rate, they would dehydrate even if they avoided a direct hit.

They fell silent.

They thought.

And then the Dragon Killer made a suggestion.

"We'll have to do it ourselves. Are you going to let that greedy son of a bitch trample on the beautiful Student Council President's dignity any longer? Let's pave our own way out of here by blowing up the armored snowplow carrying the Branding Iron. It's an emergency, so it'll count as self defense. This has got to be a far more clever option than running across that wide open lawn."

"I know just how you feel. So let's get to the next question: What exactly are we supposed to do!?"

"Shouting isn't going to summon an idea out of the ether, so let's make better use of our time. For now, let's head up while that scum of a headmaster is focused on the second floor. This is the special classroom building, so what's left on the third and fourth floors, Allen? That will have a large influence on our options."

The small Board Chairman answered instead of Allen.

"The bad news is that the tech room and infirmary are being burned up right now. The third floor has the chemistry, physics, and biology rooms, plus the supply room for each. The fourth floor has the A/V, home ec, music, and art rooms."

"Sounds great. Once we're prepared, we can get ourselves fired up by watching some porn or drawing a nude sketch."

Quenser's military-style motivational speech was not favorably received by

the classy ladies. The Board Chairman stepped on him while the idol shoved her stun sabre against his ass. Monica was at least merciful enough to not switch it on.

At any rate, they had to climb the stairs.

The third floor was still safe, but if they were glimpsed through the broken windows, a laser would be headed their way. They decided it was best to crouch down and move carefully below the windows.

“So where do we start?”

“We’re not talking about a proper military weapon here. It’s powerful as hell, but it’s still just a handmade experiment. It’ll have tons of weaknesses, so we really need to be looking at this in reverse. It’s a miracle the thing is running at all.”

For example...

“Just like railguns, lasers use a ton of electricity. That’s not a problem when equipped on a cruiser or Object, but a snowplow’s engine won’t be enough.”

“Isn’t it just using the Academy’s high-voltage line? We have a high-capacity power supply for experiments. And it’s enough to run 10 billion eV experiments like the hadron collider located below the campus.”

“The plow wasn’t hooked up to any thick cables.”

“Then how about a large-capacity battery?” asked Monica while looking down at her stun sabre.

“That’s theoretically possible, but I kind of doubt it. That would give him a limited number of shots and he would have to worry about ammo. He would have to be a complete moron to keep firing on the building like this if that were the case.”

“Then what is it???” asked Allen.

Quenser thought for a bit before answering.

“A superconducting generator.”

“What?”

“They use liquid nitrogen or helium to cool the armature terminals to ultra low temperatures. The system introduces little loss, so even a small generator can produce a lot of power. The industrial megawatt ones are the same size as a thermal power station, but the weaker kilowatt ones can be made a lot smaller. I bet the Academy’s eccentric geniuses could make one small enough to fit in that plow.”

“Liquid nitrogen and helium? Those both sound tricky to use.”

“Yes, but that’s not the real issue.”

“?”

Elritta tilted her head while crouched down, so Quenser explained.

“We don’t actually know what kind of power source it uses, but we do know that laser weapon requires an ass-load of power. Listen, we’re talking about levels of energy where no one batted an eye at you mentioning a hadron collider. Even a 100V copier can cause a short if you don’t plug it into a grounded outlet. So how is he stabilizing that much energy?”

“Dammit, now that you mention it!!”

“See? Just poke around a little and you can find all sorts of flaws. Don’t let it get to you, Allen. This is just a school experiment – a handmade device thrown together with the available parts. It’s not an official military product that’s gone through thousands or tens of thousands of rounds of durability testing. See it for what it is and you’ll see this enemy is perfectly beatable.”

Quenser grinned as they arrived at the chemistry supply room.

They once again hit the knob to break through the cheap lock and then opened the door while using a coat like a potholder. A chemical stench immediately rushed out at them.

Elritta grimaced.

“The heat seems to have caused an odd reaction in some of the chemicals.”

“I sure don’t want to stay in here long. Let’s finish this up quickly.”

Once they shut the door, there was no chance of the Headmaster seeing them while operating the Branding Iron on the hallway side of the building.

Quenser and the others could finally stand tall once more and they checked the various shelves.

“Servant, what is the plan here?”

“Let’s go with electrical breakdown,” said the student.

His prompt answer suggested he already had a vision in mind.

The only person who still looked confused was Elritta, the 10-year-old girl who was the Board Chairman but also had the Student Council Presidents tutor her.

“Air is generally an insulator. That means electricity can’t pass through it. But do you know why lightning can still strike from the sky?”

“Oh, now that you mention it.”

“That’s known as electrical breakdown. Electricity can’t pass through rubber or glass, but if enough voltage is applied, the electrical resistance breaks down and it passes right on through. There are other details about electron avalanches and whatnot, but there’s really only one thing you need to know: when the conditions are right, electricity can pass through materials it normally can’t. And what if we’re talking about enough electricity to power a laser weapon? The short will immediately blow away the armored snowplow like a firework.”

“But, Quensette, there are a lot of different insulating materials: rubber, plastic, concrete, air, pure water, and even a vacuum, I think. There isn’t much we can do without knowing what kind of safety measures the Branding Iron uses.”

“We just have to think like he does.”

“Like Headmaster Cliff does?”

“Why him? I mean the infamous professor who built the thing.”

“Bff! Are you insane!? All the illicit rock candy in the world wouldn’t be enough to sync with his thoughts!! Not even stabbing an antenna into your head and connecting to the Akashic Records at a rate of 800 megahertz would be enough!!”

Allen protested, but they did not have time for Quenser to explain every little

thing.

The continuous laser noises had reached the third floor.

The Headmaster had finished using the Branding Iron to fill the second floor with light and heat, so he was moving to the next floor up.

“Get down! The concrete walls are one thing, but the doors won’t stop that thing!!”

“That’s not the only issue. If the lasers hit the shelves of chemicals, the sulfuric acid and hydrochloric acid will vaporize and fill the room! And I don’t want to think about what that would do to us!!”

Quenser was still grabbing more chemicals, so Monica had to grab his arm and drag him away.

The four of them quickly moved to the adjacent chemistry room and then moved to the hallway door, despite knowing it was even more dangerous out there. They ducked down to remain below the windows and thus in a blind spot of the deadly anti-air lasers.

“The third floor is done for. Where are the closest stairs? We’ll be roasted if we don’t get to the next floor!”

“Wouldn’t it be faster to go back the way we came?” asked Elritta. “This way. We should be able to-...”

She trailed off because one of the Branding Iron’s orange squares burned into the wall far too close for comfort. Quenser grabbed Monica and rolled across the scorching floor. Allen did the same with Elritta. The two pairs were separated by even more blazing hot wind and light.

“He doesn’t actually know where we are! Allen, you two head to the stairs in that direction. We’ll head the opposite way. See you on the fourth floor!!”

“Understood. Don’t you die, Quensette! I forgot to mention it, but the protagonist of the script under my shirt is based on you.”

“Can you not confess that here? It’s like you’re setting it up so I’ll die here!”

At any rate, they started for the different stairways.



Quenser and Monica crouched down and moved below the windows.

“Servant, is it just me or is the laser chasing us!?”

“It’s firing randomly from one end to the other. It just happened to be moving in the same direction as us.”

They were climbing from the third floor to the fourth floor.

At that height, jumping out a window started to sound much less survivable. They had no other option at the moment, but diving into a dead end like this was not good for their hearts.

Twintail Monica groaned in that sauna from hell.

Their slingshot bow gun and stun sabre felt horribly inadequate against a legit laser weapon.

“Are you sure we can do this?”

“Do you know what the safest route is, young lady? Killing your most dangerous enemy.”

After Allen parted ways with Quenser and Monica, a horrible feeling caught in his chest.

He could hear the Branding Iron growing more distant.

He felt the same alienation as when he was left behind in the theater after the movie ended. He felt like he had run into a dead end like when he had submitted a script he was extremely proud of but never heard anything back.

(Yeah.)

He summed up his thoughts while carrying Elritta.

(This is, well, how should I put it? It’s like the invisible goddess of fortune has left me. It’s like my beginner’s luck has finally worn off and death has returned to the world like normal.) The Branding Iron’s orange squares of light had been pursuing Quenser and Monica along the windows and hallway wall, but now they turned back toward Allen and Elritta.

The light, heat, and noise were all intense.

He knew it was not actually targeting them, but he still cowered down like when lightning struck nearby.

And then he felt a tremor.

He assumed it was just his own body shaking in fear.

And that was not wrong.

But it was not entirely right either.

“...”

The 10-year-old girl in his arms was trembling. She must have felt the same isolation and alienation he had. She would have sensed the stench of death too. And when she saw the fear in an older boy like Allen and felt him shaking, she had known she was not just imagining things.

Allen Jackrose was not an actor.

He had wanted to stand on the silver screen, but he had quickly learned he was not cut out for it.

But the world of film had refused to let go of his heart.

The same could be said of the puny script hidden below his shirt.

He was not a knight in shining armor.

The true Dragon Killer was that boy who ran across the battlefield with nothing more than a bomb and stood up to those colossal weapons that not even a nuke could destroy.

But.

Even so.

He knew what the protagonist in his script would say when faced with a trembling and fearful girl who had tears in her eyes as she faced seemingly certain death. He knew exactly what line he would give to that kind of utter moron who would not hesitate to stand up and hold out his hand to that girl.

“Don’t worry.”

That persona existed in a corner of Allen Jackrose’s mind.

So he just had to act it out for himself.

“There is nothing to be afraid of. After all, the heroes never lose.”

Allen remained motionless even as the brutal anti-air lasers passed by directly overhead.

He simply held the girl’s small shoulders in his arms until she stopped shaking.

Until she could see how unwavering he was.

He would not lose, he would not run away, he would not cry, and he would not give up.

Allen Jackrose silently made up his mind.

“Let’s head on up. Victory awaits us.”

It did not matter that he was bluffing.

It did not matter that he was just acting the movie star.

If it would let him protect someone’s smile, then he would be the hero on the silver screen tonight.

He would use the logic of the script he had written to protect that girl’s heart.

Worried because Allen and Elritta still had not shown up, Quenser circled around the fourth floor hallway to check the stairway those two were meant to use. But when he did see them there, he raised his index and middle fingers on either side of his head to look like bull horns.

And he stomped about while jabbing those horns into the air.

“(Dammit, Allen! Quit acting cool and get up here already!!)”

“(Stop that, servant. You need to be patient. Really, you should use this as a lesson in how to be a proud and chivalrous member of the Legitimacy Kingdom.)”

## Part 9

Headmaster Cliff French-Connection was confused.

(I haven't noticed any activity inside.)

He doubted they had escaped through the underground route. None of his randomly-placed sensors had detected anything. It was also unlikely they had escaped through the windows on the opposite side of the building. He had found the time to place a few cameras on tripods on the lawn there, but those had not detected anything either.

The only remaining option was that they were still inside the building, but...

(Are they curled up in fear with nowhere to go while everything melts around them? Or...) The radio duct taped to the armored snowplow's driver's seat continued to receive messages for the teacher who had originally operated the Branding Iron.

"Hans! What is your plan here? The students have already left the special classroom building, so there's no reason to keep attacking it!!"

"You can hear that request for backup, can't you? We've taken a lot of casualties at the physics lab building! The Branding Iron is our most powerful weapon and its mere presence acts as a show of force. Hurry back to your post!!"

"No, wait. Is...is that not Hans? Who are you!?"

Cliff did not need to reply.

He could stop them simply by turning around the Branding Iron's planetarium-like barrel and firing on a few targets. The Branding Iron brought the speed of light to the battlefield, so it was an absolute presence in an open space. No matter how much they fortified themselves, they could not approach.

And thanks to the superconducting generator built into the system, the

energy problem was almost entirely solved, unlike with a battery or high-voltage power line. It was nigh impossible to defeat it with a silly strategy like “waiting for it to run out of gas”.

He had a much more important issue to focus on.

(I doubt they're headed higher just to escape the immediate threat. If they were that cowardly, they would never have searched out the secret file. But what is it? What exactly are they thinking?) That was when the possibility of a long-term battle entered Cliff's mind.

After all, he was most frightened by the idea of a stalemate end where they might be alive or dead. He was burning down the entire building, so it would be a problem if nothing else happened. The more he stuck with this, the more the students and teachers would suspect there was more to this. And as time passed, the councilors might overcome their shock and throw out their pride as a lawful nation by providing special authorization for the military to keep the peace within the safe country.

He wanted to escape outside the fence before that happened. If possible, he wanted to fan the flames of anxiety to ensure a largescale bombing of the Academy to vaporize the teachers...no, the Elritta supporters who were trying to find evidence of his financial malpractice.

So Elritta's group had no real reason to fight back.

They did not even need to give any hints they had been hit by the lasers.

Taking no action was an action.

In other words, simply waiting and allowing time to pass would do plenty of damage to Cliff.

This entire incident had been intended as a shot in the arm for Cliff since the walls had been closing in on him as things were. If the passage of time returned things to normal, he was done for. In that sense, he was the same as a terrorist. Terrorists selfishly used violence to inspire social unrest so they could control the world as they saw fit, so what they feared most was to have nothing special happen and everyone to just continue living their lives like normal. Because if they were wielding a gun and shouting at people, it meant they were already

hopelessly cornered from the very beginning.

(I want some proof. Some proof that this is over.)

Right to left. End to end. Cliff clenched his teeth while continually firing the laser to transform the third floor of the special classroom building into a scorching sauna.

(I'm not going to just assume it's over. I need to know for sure. I need to know I've destroyed the secret file that Elritta and her supporters found!!)  
Theoretically, repeating these straightforward actions was the most surefire method available to him.

He would fill all four floors with light and heat. And while that heat lingered, he would start again from the bottom up. Then he only had to let time pass. If he kept the entire building too hot to survive even with a fire-resistant suit, it would not matter which room's corner they were curled up in. He disliked not knowing what format the secret file was in, but he could search through the corpses and steal it afterwards.

He had to ensure they were dead and then allow the heat to dissipate so he could get inside.

That meant this was indeed a race against time. If it took too long, the students and the teachers or the police and military outside could come rushing in at him.

So he set the lasers for maximum damage.

Elritta's group had clung to the fantasy of truth to the point of abandoning their own safety. He knew they would choose to nobly lose their lives if he cornered them.

But then something else happened.

An arrow was mercilessly fired at the armored snowplow.

It was all short-term. His enemy had never even considered choosing a long-term battle that presupposed their deaths.

## Part 10

Meanwhile, Quenser and the others had regrouped and continued all the way up to the roof.

They had launched an arrow.

A laser was fired in response.

As soon as the planetarium lens moved down on the ground, Quenser and the others should have been wiped out. But they were not.

Because...

“Take this!!”

Allen’s words were followed by the color orange blazing through the previously dark space around him. But these were not mysterious will-o’-the-wisps.

It was the movie script he had kept hidden under his shirt.

He had thrown the several hundred pieces of copy paper into the air above him.

“The Branding Iron can only lock onto 20 targets at once, so this should be enough to confuse it!”

“But that was your script!!”

“It’s fine.”

Allen smiled within the floating embers.

He smiled and patted the young Board Chairman’s head.

“This is fine. I won’t let it go to waste. We can’t lose, we won’t allow any sacrifices, and we’ll do anything to pull it off! Isn’t that right, Quensette!?”

“Yeah.”

The boy next to him did not hesitate to answer.

Quenser held his slingshot bow gun while looking down using the screen of the phone Allen held out for him.

“I was worried about a number of things, but it actually hit. I didn’t realize trajectory calculation programs made such a difference.”

“It was originally a golf practice app.”

“More importantly, servant! What can that puny little shaft do? Even if you attached a glass fiber bag full of sulfuric acid, I seriously doubt it could break through that thick armor!!”

“That armor is like several layers of steel panels for construction, so not even an assault rifle could punch through it. But I wasn’t trying to.”

“Then what were you doing?”

“The actual Branding Iron is the spherical unit that looks like a planetarium lens on top of the snowplow. And it of course needs a cable to hook it up. But we’re talking about a high-voltage power line. It would burn right through normal plastic insulation. Now, a question: what’s the easiest to use of the insulators you would have on hand?”

“???”

Elritta did not have the basic knowledge necessary, so it may have been an unfair question for her.

Allen answered instead.

“Silicone oil, right? I’m guessing it uses two layers of insulation with the oil running between them, or the metal cable inside is coated with the stuff.”

“I was thinking the same thing. It provides 30 times the insulation of air and more than 10 times that of plastic and you can easily buy it at your local auto parts store. That infamous professor might have a total galaxy brain, but he takes his work seriously. He puts together a workable theory, gathers the necessary materials where he can find them, and then uses the power of the Academy to force his way through when that isn’t enough. He doesn’t use those twisted detours if he doesn’t have to. Using the Academy’s power requires



writing and submitting paperwork. Normal people hate eccentrics, but eccentrics hate having to act normal for other people's sake. So he would avoid that paperwork whenever possible. And that means he'll use the available materials when he can. That's true whether you're a normal people, an eccentric, or a complete and utter lunatic."

The Branding Iron's planetarium-like laser unit moved once more.

But it was too late. The arrow had been launched and it had hit.

"The thing about silicone oil is, not only does it have an extremely high electrical resistance, but it's also highly resistant to both high and low temperatures. It's also highly waterproof and air bubbles have a hard time forming in it. Since it comes from silicon, making it a cousin of glass, it's also highly resistant to a lot of different chemicals. It's such a superb insulator that it's used in industrial motors, but needless to say, there is no such thing as an all-powerful material. It will start to corrode if it's exposed to an alkali hydroxide, which are components in chemical detergents that are just a bit bad for your skin. Ideally, this would melt through the plastic coating as well."

In other words...

"Silicone oil is an extremely powerful insulator, but what if we chemically alter it into another substance? If the insulation is suddenly taken away, the Branding Iron's power will bare its fangs toward the very person using it."

As soon as he finished speaking, one corner of the Academy's night was filled with white light.

## Part 11

Headmaster Cliff French-Connection screamed when it exploded.

“Aaaahhh

He did not actually understand what had happened.

He had only hijacked the Branding Iron, so even if he knew how to operate it, he did not understand the design or how to maintain it. So he simply assumed its massive power source had shorted out and caused an explosion.

And when the light and noise exploded behind him, all he could do was curl up in the driver’s seat protected by the armor panels.

However...

“Wh-what?”

He could still speak.

He was still alive.

“What happened!?”

If the laser unit was unusable, he would have to rethink his plan from the ground up. Top priority was preventing Elritta’s group from escaping the building so they would roast inside. He thought it might be fastest to remove the fuel from the snowplow’s tank and throw it into the overheated first floor through a window.

But he was unaware that his priorities were out of order.

“I’m sure you are all familiar with liquid nitrogen,” said Quenser on the rooftop. “That extreme coolant exists at 195 degrees below 0. Of course, if you heat it up, the liquid transforms into a gas. And that means its volume rapidly expands.”

He had already seen a weapon that used that fact.

By filling a pipe with liquid nitrogen instead of an explosive and then rapidly applying heat to vaporize it, the pressure would launch a projectile toward the teachers' armored vehicles.

So they just had to do the same here.

"That superconducting generator uses liquid nitrogen. When the electrical breakdown allows all that power to reach it, the heat will be enough to melt metal, so what do you think will happen then? Surely you can answer me that, teach."

"And once you do that, yes, do that and you will find..."

While spreading fear through students and teachers alike by firing a handmade coilgun all across the Academy from a small trailer, the infamous professor suddenly stopped muttering a lecture and looked up.

He stared into the distance and his eyes focused on reality for a brief moment.

"Yes, excellent work," he said. "I give that a perfect 100."

"Ah."

Cliff French-Connection did not understand the exact theory behind it.

But as he viewed the scene through the gap between armor panels, he saw his armored snowplow swell out from within.

He only knew that the solid wall of death was about to slam into his body.

And a moment later, everything was blown to smithereens.

## Part 12

It was all over.

It did not take long once Headmaster Cliff French-Connection was blown to bits.

First, they got Board Chairman Elritta Champs-Élysées to the other side of the fence. Once the thick secret file was in the hands of the police, the police saluted and patted the girl's head before rushing onto the campus within the fence.

The distinction between student and teacher no longer mattered.

Those puppets' strings had been cut, so they readily put their hands up like the entire conflict had been a lie. That was a sign of just how abnormal the world created by the Headmaster had been.

Meanwhile.

Allen checked the time on his phone, which was almost out of battery, and then collapsed onto the lawn.

"It's over! It's all over! Oh, goddammit! There's no way I can win that script competition now!! That was my dream, you know!? As naïve as it might be!!"

"Sorry. I wish I could make it up for you, but I have no pull in the entertainment industry."

Little Board Chairman Elritta sounded apologetic, but Quenser made sure to pat her head.

He smiled and asked a question.

"You say that, but if you could redo today, would you abandon this girl and run off to the competition? It would also mean abandoning the beautiful Student Council President."

“Goddammit.”

Still on the ground, Allen moved his hands like he was washing his face.

But he was not pathetically crying.

“I’d save them. Yes, I’d save them!! I mean, I poured my heart and soul into writing that, so I couldn’t let it be stained by bloody rumors of a death in its background! So I’d save them. The much better story is to have saved the world real quick on the way to the competition!!”

After one last glance at Allen, Quenser turned toward super-mini dress Monica.

“Lady Monica, aren’t there any special measures for things like this? I mean, we practically had a war break out on campus.”

“That isn’t my field, but with idol auditions, you’re disqualified if you’re even a second late even if a meteor hit. For one thing, success in the entertainment industry isn’t achieved solely through the strengths of an individual. Luck and trends are as important to business opportunities as skill is. Unfortunately, people’s efforts can go unrewarded if they arrived at the wrong time. That’s just how it works.”

Twintail Monica sighed.

But she was not done yet.

“Still, if my instincts are right, a change is about to come over the industry. And in my business, a hyena-level nose is crucial.”

“?”

“Hey, Allen. The entertainment business is a small one and it isn’t kind enough to always give someone what they want. And with the hundreds or even thousands of people involved in the production of a film, an individual’s opinions are easily altered. Things might not go according to plan, but are you still interested in knocking on the gates of that world you’ve dreamed of joining? Are you ready to make a film, even if it’s nothing like the script you wrote?” Monica smiled thinly. “If you’re willing to follow through on this, then I think this incident might just work out in your favor.”

That was when his nearly-dead phone received a call.

When he sat up and answered it, the producer on the other end immediately began speaking at a mile a minute.

“Hey there!! Sounds like you had a real rough day! Anyway, we just got the green light on producing a film based on that Academy Occupation. We’d love to get a firsthand account. We’re especially interested in some inside Academy information on what we’re allowed to show and what’s a secret. So how would you like to join our writing team, rookie!?”